Sandra M. Schneiders

The Revelatory Text

INTERPRETING THE NEW TESTAMENT AS SACRED SCRIPTURE

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Advance praise for *The Revelatory Text*

"By drawing on the resources of the best contemporary hermeneutical theory, Schneiders breathes new life into familiar notions such as inspiration, revelation and the Bible as 'the word of God,' while her proposal for a 'hermeneutics of transformation' breaks new ground for a creative dialog between scholarly study of the Bible and its use in the church. Carefully thought-out and elegantly written, this work will be a standard for theologians and biblical scholars for years to come."

—John R. Donahue, S.J., professor of New Testament,
Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, California

"Once again Sandra Schneiders leads the way through the difficulties of biblical interpretation, this time with a major study of contemporary hermeneutics and the New Testament. Her claim that 'contemporary New Testament scholarship actually lacks a developed hermeneutical theory,' that New Testament scholarship knows what to do but lacks the critical consciousness of the effectiveness of what it is doing, is an amazing but well-founded claim. She sets out to construct such a theory, using some of the best tools of philosophy, theology, spirituality, and tradition for the task. The result is a lucid exposition that will help many steer their way between the sharp rocks of scientific and literary methods which presently divide the scholarly community and will no doubt be a major resource and springboard for further development for years to come."

—Carolyn Osiek, R.S.C.J., professor, Department of Biblical
Literature and Languages, Catholic Theological Union

"A major theoretical defense of hermeneutics as transformation in the tradition of Ricoeur and Gadamer, this book should be required reading for all exegetes working within a Christian tradition. The author advocates a wholistic model of interpretation which incorporates the broad range of strategies of reading found in the academy today. Her model treats the Bible as the founding text of Christian spirituality and insists that a Christian imagination plays a crucial role in our encounter with and understanding of the text."

—Pheme Perkins, professor, Theology Department,
Boston College, author of *Reading the New Testament*

“Just as the New Testament is a classic, Dr. Schneiders’ contribution to our understanding of its interpretation will undoubtedly become a classic in its own right. Schneiders engages some of the most pressing questions which have haunted biblical interpreters—academics, ministers, diverse kinds of believers—since the Enlightenment. As usual, Dr. Schneiders’ exposition is coherent, carefully organized and, because of its brilliant clarity, accessible to scholars and non-scholars alike.”

—Alice Laffey, professor, Department of Religious Studies, College of the Holy Cross, author of *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective*

“Once again Sandra Schneiders has brought her creative and critical insights to bear on the hermeneutical question and has produced a text of great clarity. Her book challenges its readers not only intellectually but as christian believers. It will not only advance the current dialogue on biblical interpretation but will be a sourcebook for the study of spirituality as well.”

—Mary Milligan, R.S.H.M., professor of Spirituality,
Loyola Marymount University

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INTERPRETING THE NEW TESTAMENT AS SACRED SCRIPTURE

Second Edition

Sandra M. Schneiders

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To my friends
Dot, Margaret, Ruth, Mary, Kathleen, Clare, and Connie
who have taught me
more about revelation than I have learned from books

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Acknowledgments

The first edition of this volume carried acknowledgments I wish to reiterate in this new edition and two that, sadly, require modification. There are others it is a pleasure to add to this second edition.

To begin with the modifications, I owe not only much of whatever knowledge and skill I may have in matters scriptural but especially my love of the biblical text and its message to my former professors Raymond E. Brown, S.S. and Edward J. Malatesta, S.J., who became over the years admired colleagues and cherished friends. My gratitude must now follow them beyond this life from which they both departed, too young, in 1998. May they rest in peace.

Looking back on the many years during which this book germinated I remember with special affection my fellow student and friend William MacBeath ("Mac") Brown, C.S.B., with whom I shared the exciting questions that led eventually to its writing. Our friendship and shared interest in the role of Scripture in the spiritual life was not ended but transformed by his untimely death in 1984. I continue to hope that there is some relationship between what I have written and what he now experiences face to face.

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I owe very special appreciation to the research assistants who over the years have offered efficient, timely, and intelligent help with the myriad details of writing,

especially Bruce Lescher, who is now a valued colleague and friend, and Susan Hames who helped with the first edition. Two current students, Mary Rose Bumpus and James Silva, have been very helpful through their careful reading of the text and their suggestions about the revision and I look forward to their own contributions in the years to come.

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In the first edition I expressed my appreciation for the institutional support, both financial and personal, from my own and other institutions and, although I will not repeat that lengthy list here, I continue to be grateful for the help that made the first edition possible and has contributed to this second edition.

No litany of thanks would be complete without mention of those people outside the academy who have supported me in myriad ways throughout the years. For their unfailing faith, confidence, and loving support the leaders and members of my religious congregation, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, deserve my endless gratitude. I continue to count on the intelligent and warm encouragement of John S. Cummins, the bishop of Oakland, California, whose deep respect for the intellectual life and appreciation of the contribution of theologians to the life of the Church make service to and in the local church a joy as well as a privilege. The seven women to whom this book is dedicated know that what I owe them is beyond thanks.

To these and many other colleagues, students, and friends with whom I have shared in the riches of the New Testament over the years my deepest gratitude for your contribution, even as I accept sole responsibility for all that is still inadequate in the text.

January 3, 1999
Feast of the Ephiphany

Abbreviations

BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CBQ	*The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
DBI	*A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation.* Edited by R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden. London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990. References in the notes include author, title of article, and pages cited.
DV	"Dei Verbum" [Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican Council II]. In *Documents of Vatican II,* vol. 1. Edited by Austin P. Flannery. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984: 750–765. References in the notes include chapter and section number(s).
HHS	Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation.* Edited, translated, and with an introduction by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981.
IT	Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning.* Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976.
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
NJBC	*The New Jerome Biblical Commentary.* Edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990. References in the notes include author, title of article, number of article, and section number(s).
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989. Unless otherwise indicated, English citations from the New Testament are from this version.
NTMI	*The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters.* Edited by Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae. Philadelphia: Fortress; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989. References in the notes include author, title of article, and page numbers of the citation.

NTS	*New Testament Studies*
RSV	Revised Standard Version Bible, 1952.
TM	Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method.* 2d rev. ed. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Crossroad, 1989.
TS	*Theological Studies*

Preface to the Second Edition

I. Introduction

The first edition of *The Revelatory Text* was published in 1991 just as the proliferation of methodologies in New Testament research, which had been developing for over a decade, was becoming a mainstream phenomenon in the biblical academy. Consequently, although seven years is a very short time in the world of scholarship, it is not surprising that the conversation about biblical interpretation has been intense enough to have raised a number of questions that were not evident at the time the book first appeared but are nevertheless pertinent to the argument presented in the text.

Furthermore, as doctoral students have used the book as a basic text in hermeneutics and as colleagues in this country and in various parts of the world have used it in graduate and seminary classes as well as with Bible study groups and other adult learners it has become clear that certain ideas expressed in very brief or condensed form as part of a larger argument needed considerable expansion if they were to be readily grasped, especially by those with limited philosophical or theological background.

Finally, this same usage has also highlighted certain aspects of the hermeneutical theory proposed in the book, some of which were treated very briefly but have proven more helpful than I originally anticipated and, for that reason, also merit revisiting and expansion.

In the intervening years more than a few excellent volumes relevant to the hermeneutical project have appeared. A number of these studies treat various methods, demonstrate the use of particular methods, or compare the results of using different methods on the same texts.[1] Others discuss interpretation itself, particularly the role of the reader and his or her social location in the act of interpretation.[2] In the last several years there has emerged a very interesting concern on the part of some biblical scholars with the pragmatics of interpretation or the mutual effects of the appropriation of the meaning of the text and the skill in application to life of that meaning.[3]

However, as far as I know no one has attempted a development, parallel to that in *The Revelatory Text,* of a full-scale theory of interpretation that would contest the discussion presented. Therefore, since the text is a closely reasoned argument in which the parts are mutually interdependent I have chosen not to revise the text itself at this point by injecting into it new considerations, resources, and expansions. Instead it has seemed wiser to leave the text as it is for the time being and, in respectful imitation of Amos Wilder,[4] to write a substantial Preface to this second edition in which I will take up, serially, a number of issues that seem to require a second engagement at this moment in history.

Readers who are new to the book might want to go directly to the text itself and return to this Preface when and if the relevant sections of the text require elaboration. Those already familiar with the book might find the Preface helpful with points that posed problems or opened lines of reflection that were not followed out in the original text. For all readers it is my intention in this Preface not only to expand upon issues originally treated more briefly but to engage some of the discussion, particularly about texts and history, objectivity and postmodernity, faith and scholarship that have arisen among readers of the first edition.

II. The Title of the Book

In 1995 *The Revelatory Text* was translated into French, appearing in the Lectio Divina Series from Cerf in Paris and Fides in Canada.[5] The translators recognized that they could not simply render the title in French without occasioning not only misunderstanding but a genuine *contre-sens.* "Le texte revelatoire" would have meant "the text that reveals" and "le texte revelé" would have been read as "the revealed text." Two major points of the book are that the biblical text does not "reveal" in the sense of transmitting information from God to humans and that the biblical text is not "revealed" in the sense of being communicated directly by God to the author. Both of these positions, espoused explicitly by fundamentalists and naïvely assumed by mainline literalists, expose the faith of Christians in the revelatory character of their foundational literature to the dismissal (if not ridicule) of sophisticated moderns who know that no book, Bible, Koran, or Bhagavad Gita, can sustain such claims.

A major intention of *The Revelatory Text* was to hold in tension and make credible the claim, on the one hand, that this text does mediate the believer's encounter with God and, on the other hand, that it is a human text that manifests all the traits of such an artifact and must be dealt with accordingly. In other words, I have tried to maintain that faith (in this case specifically faith of and in the Christian Bible) is not a purely private position but one that can be presented and discussed in the public forum in a rationally defensible way without evacuating faith through secularizing reductionism.

My original choice of "revelatory" rather than "revealed" or "revealing" was an attempt to capture this tension in English. The difficulty many people, both Americans and other English-speakers, have had pronouncing the word both validates my intuition that the word is not simply a synonym of "revealed" or "revealing" and is sufficiently strange to raise the appropriate question (What does it mean for a text to be "revelatory"?) and makes me aware of its limited usefulness! French, being a much less fluid and malleable language than English, could not duplicate the English ambiguity. This was indeed a "felix culpa."

The French translator rendered the title *Le Texte de la Rencontre,* a felicitous play on "la tente de la rencontre" or the "meeting tent" where Moses and, through him, the Israelites encountered and conversed with God (cf. Exod. 33:7-23). The meeting tent, of course, was the Old Testament allusion undergirding the Johannine understanding of the Incarnation itself as the "tenting" of God among us for the purpose of intimate and transformative encounter (cf. John 1:14).

This wonderful French rendering, in effect, supplies the key to the proper understanding of the title. It intends to suggest that the biblical text is, potentially, and through the process of interpretation, a place of meeting, the locus of encounter and conversation between God and humanity. As *Dei Verbum* put it, in "the sacred books [God] . . . comes lovingly to meet [God's] children, and talks with them" (VI, 21).[6] In that engagement we do, of course, come to know God's design for humanity, not primarily through the transfer of otherwise unavailable intellectual information, but through the process of coming to "know God" as the One who acts in our midst and invites our participation in the divine project in this world. The challenge of the interpreter is less to find out what God knows than to put on the mind of Christ. As in the tent of meeting Israel, through Moses, encountered God and gradually learned what it meant to be God's people, so in the prolonged engagement with the biblical text the Church as community learns what it means to be People of God, and individual Christians what it means to be disciples of Christ today. Although the word play does not work as well in English, if I were renaming the book today I might choose to call it "The Text of Meeting."

III. The Relation of the Text to Its Subject Matter

In chapter 4, "The World Behind the Text," I attempted to reformulate the question that, for the third time in recent history, has become a very live issue in biblical studies, "the historical Jesus question."[7] Since 1991 the "third quest for the historical Jesus" has become even more controversial as both scholars and laity, including the press, have weighed in for or against the (in)famous "Jesus Seminar"[8] and competent biblical scholars have written wonderfully popular and impressively massive tomes on the subject.[9]

I devoted twelve pages to a highly compressed attempt to reformulate and respond to the traditional question about the historical Jesus as it was pertinent to the issue of interpretation of the New Testament. That traditional question might be formulated as follows: "Is the New Testament text factually accurate in its presentation of Jesus of Nazareth and insofar as it is not, what are the facts?" The motivation for reformulating the question was not that I think the quest for the facts about the earthly Jesus is unimportant or uninteresting but that focusing on that question subverts the project of interpreting the New Testament as sacred scripture. It suggests that the real purpose of New Testament research is to answer that question, and that if it were to be answered comprehensively it would give us access to the "real" Jesus of Christian faith. In fact, such is not the case. Christian faith bears upon Jesus as presented in the New Testament and proclaimed by the Church, not on some figure from the past presumed to "lie behind" that text. In other words, the real Jesus of Christian faith *is* the object of New Testament research, but that person *is not* the figure the "questers" are trying to reconstruct.

The historical critical question that can move the project of interpretation forward is, I suggest, "What is the relationship between the gospel text and its subject matter, Jesus?" Two facets of this question demand attention. First, it is abundantly clear that the New Testament writers did *not* intend to give us an ancient literary version of a videotape of the life and doings of Jesus. But, second, it is also clear that they *did* intend to write truthfully about Jesus, indeed to treat him in such a way that their texts could ground saving faith in him (cf. John 20:30-31 for the most explicit statement of this intention). We must, therefore, make some judgment about the historicity of the text's subject matter and the validity of its treatment of that subject matter. But we must go beyond that question to inquire how the treatment of Jesus in the New Testament text mediates the transformative encounter with Jesus Christ in the present.

The brief treatment of this question in *The Revelatory Text* has proven to be, for many students and colleagues, the most important single contribution of the book, and many people have asked me to "unpack" it. I am happy to have the opportunity to do so because my own thinking on the subject has been clarified by my ongoing engagement with two developments in the area of historical thought. The first is the very helpful distinction made by Marcus Borg between the "pre-Easter Jesus" and the "post-Easter Jesus."[10] The second is the challenge and clarification offered by the "new historicism."[11] Borg's distinction nuances my first level (the actual Jesus) and new historicism helps to clarify my non-conventional suggestion about the second level (the historical Jesus).

The original fourfold distinction I proposed was meant to suggest that there are four different ways in which, or levels on which, the New Testament material, especially the gospels, is related to its subject matter, i.e., Jesus. Another way of putting it is that there are four "Jesuses" operative in our faith: the actual Jesus, the historical Jesus, the proclaimed Jesus, and the textual Jesus. These are not four distinct and separable, much less chronologically successive figures, but four perspectives on the relationship of the text to Jesus, each of which plays a constitutive role in our encounter with the living Jesus in and through the text.

A. The Actual Jesus

By the *actual Jesus* I mean the ontic being, the person Jesus, in his facticity. Jesus actually existed in the first century in Palestine but no longer exists this way. Today, Christians believe, the actual Jesus exists in the glory of God and is active everywhere, particularly through his members. But both these sentences require careful nuance. Several things must be said about the actual Jesus of the first century. First, he no longer exists as such any more than my six-year-old self exists as such. That child has been subsumed into my actual self as the adult I am at this moment. I would not be who I am at this moment (indeed I would not be at all!) without this child, but the child no longer exists independently of my actual adult self. Analogously, the actual Jesus alive in the glory of God would not be who he is if he had not been the actual first-century Palestinian Jew, but that actuality has been subsumed into who Jesus is now. Second, the actual Jesus who exists today is the glorified Christ, communicated through the Holy Spirit, about whom we make theological statements rather than strictly or exclusively historical ones. We say that he exists in the glory of God, that he is active as Spirit in our lives, that his glorified body is inclusively all the baptized, that the "organ" of his activity in the world is that glorified body.

The time of the actual Jesus who walked about in first-century Palestine is historical time in which Jesus, like other historical beings, was governed by chronological time, three-dimensional space, and the laws of causality. The eternity of the actual Jesus today is a dimension about which we know little. Jesus is no longer governed by space and time; he transcends causality as we understand it. The gospels create, narratively, an "overlap period" in which the reader is shown the difference between these two phases of the actual Jesus. The resurrection narratives relate the experiences of the first disciples as they adjust to the fact that Jesus is no longer among them in his physical body but that he is no less present; that he is present in and among them but not physically. Stories of Jesus "arising" into their midst while the doors were shut (cf. John 20:19), appearing simultaneously to two disciples on the way to Emmaus and to Simon Peter in Jerusalem (cf. Luke 24:13-34); being unrecognizable and then recognized without changing appearance (cf. John 20:14-16) are narrative explorations of the different way Jesus exists and is present through his resurrection.

The gospels, in other words, present two phases of the actual Jesus, one before Easter and one after Easter. It is the same Jesus, but his mode of existence, i.e., his actuality, as well as his way of being present and of acting are very different.

Marcus Borg has made a real contribution to clarity of thinking and accuracy of talking about these two phases and the relationship between them. He suggests we speak not of the "historical Jesus" and the "Christ of faith" as if there were only an extrinsic relationship between two quite different "persons," but of the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus.

The pre-Easter Jesus who is presented to us in the gospels is, in fact, already the Christ of Christian faith because those who wrote about Jesus' earthly life were already believers interpreting him in light of their comprehensive experience of him, including his resurrection. And the post-Easter Jesus is not simply "the Christ" but still really Jesus, transcendent in glory but constituted by his entire human experience including his relationship with God. In other words, the actual Jesus is Jesus Christ who lived and died in first-century Palestine and is now present and active among us through the Spirit in the glory of God. But we can distinguish, without separating, the two phases and acknowledge that the gospel narrative, up to the resurrection, intends to acquaint us with the earthly life of Jesus (always interpreted in light of the resurrection) in order that we can come to know the human being in whom we believe and that it intends, by recounting the resurrection narratives, to tell us who the Jesus in whom we believe is now in virtue of his glorification.

The advantage of this approach is that we need not (and should not) attempt to "get back to" a "purely historical" Jesus whom his disciples did not know was divine (and who perhaps did not know it himself) as the "real" Jesus and then try to account for the Easter faith of those disciples that created the glorified "Christ." All knowledge of Jesus Christ, that of the pre-Easter as well as the post-Easter Jesus, is suffused with the resurrection, but this does not mean that the eyewitnesses from whom the gospels ultimately stem and the evangelists who codified that witness in written texts were incapable of distinguishing what happened in the life of the pre-Easter Jesus from what happened after their Easter experience and to recognize the difference in Jesus himself and their experience of him. It is precisely because they did make that distinction that they recount the "overlap" period so that their readers can make the same transition. What it does mean is that there will never be a way of "reconstructing" the pre-Easter Jesus as if he were not actually glorified. And that is exactly as it should be. The real Jesus is not the pre-Easter or "earthly" Jesus as if he never died and rose. The real Jesus is the living Jesus Christ whose actual reality subsumes, as his personal past, his pre-Easter experience now transformed in glory.

This is the point at which new historical insights can be particularly helpful. While not wishing to caricature the sophisticated historical work of the scholars involved, I would maintain that the "third quest," like its two predecessors, works out of a basically positivist historical model. The fundamental assumption is that "history" is what took place in the past exactly as it actually took place. It assumes a free-standing, objective reality, now past, but once existing independently of us, the current historiographers. This is the assumption that both philosophers such as Gadamer and new historians are calling into question. The latter sometimes express discomfort with the very expression "the world behind the text" precisely because it seems to suggest that there is some free-standing reality that the historian can, by the proper use of methods, get "back to" and then describe. In fact, the "past" as such an entity or state of affairs does not exist. The past exists only as it is subsumed into the experience, including the interpretive activity, of the subject in the present. The evangelists were not looking back on and describing an objective past, the life of the earthly Jesus, which they then interpreted in the light of their resurrection faith. They only had access to the "past" as it was part of their present.

The validity of this insight is made abundantly clear by the very fact that we have four quite diverse gospels that cannot be harmonized. Each gospel arose from the way in which the Jesus-event was incorporated into the experience of a particular community that had its own problems, concerns, agendas, personalities to deal with, mode of celebrating, victories over adversity, suffering, and so on. Nothing about the Jesus story was unaffected by its incorporation into this extremely complex experience. It was inextricably knit into the fabric of the present. And when the evangelist of each of these communities came to inscribe the Jesus story he or she incorporated this already complex interpretation into her or his own experience, thus further knitting it into the fabric of a yet later present. There is no way to disentangle some "pure Jesus history" from this very complex interpretive web, and thus we have four different "versions" of one life that are irreducibly different from one another while all being historically reliable.

Furthermore, we have to deal with the fact that some versions of the Jesus story did not make it into the canon, and that this was not necessarily due exclusively to some direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit marking them as unorthodox or spurious (or the accepted ones as inspired) but may, in some cases, have been due, at least partially, to the biases and prejudices, or the politics, or the ignorance of members of the first communities.[12] Or it may just have been that some things were ahead of their time and the community was not able to see what they had to offer. The notion of "canon," therefore, cannot be reduced to a completely comprehensive (even if adequate) divinely sanctioned list of ecclesiastically approved books. It has to be recognized as a flexible tradition, operative in the community from a very early period, that both included and excluded certain works. The community is the poorer in some cases for what was excluded. In a way the canon is like the "story of my life." "My life" only includes what I have lived. Because of choices, some made by me and some by others and some by "chance," some good and some bad, certain things were included and others excluded. I cannot change what constitutes "my life" and it has a certain normative effect on everything I do and will do because I have become the person I have become. But that does not mean that I cannot reconnect with some things or persons or opportunities rejected or excluded in the past and, in dialogue with them in the present, enrich who I am. Thus the Church's canon is the body of literature that has effected who and what the Church has become. But that does not mean that it cannot reengage and be enriched by some of what it once saw as heretical or spurious.

Finally, the new historical insight about the nonexistence of a free-standing or "objectively knowable" past that is not actually a feature of the present is confirmed by the very "historical Jesus quest" itself. Even scholars working at exactly the same time and with access to the same historical materials are each coming up with a very different "Jesus"! Mark Powell gives a brief summary of the "constructions" of Jesus by the five preeminent representatives of contemporary "historical Jesus" research.[13] Marcus Borg's portrait of Jesus as a "spirit person" whose intimacy with God inspired his mission, John Dominic Crossan's view of Jesus as a radical peasant who was a Jewish Cynic teacher of a new wisdom, John Meier's Jewish teacher on the margins of his society, E. P. Sanders' version of Jesus as eschatological prophet, and N. T. Wright's presentation of Jesus as prophet and messiah enacting God's plan are different enough from one another to make it plain that none of these "constructions" has arrived at the stated goal. If one of them were the true picture of who the pre-Easter Jesus actually was, the others would have to be false. But in fact each of these reconstructions (or as new historicists would say, "representations") is a present version of Jesus arising from the interaction among historical data derived in some cases from new resources and in others from new evaluations of older resources, tradition accepted or repudiated, the current agendas and concerns of the researchers, and numerous other factors. Current researchers may have better resources and better methods for dealing with the aspect of their representation that arises from engagement of ancient materials but they, like all Jesus scholars before them, are "making Jesus in their own image" because that is the only way any of us can see him.

In summary, the *actual Jesus* is Jesus Christ existing now in glory and active in this world in and through his Spirit animating his body which is the Church. This is the Jesus of Christian faith. He cannot be reduced to who he was in his pre-Easter phase (to which, in any case, we have no direct and unbiased access) or to any one account of him in the New Testament, or to any reconstruction of him by later scholars. What the gospel accounts of the pre-Easter Jesus can do is call into question some of these later accounts as well as privately constructed or ecclesiastically manipulated versions of Jesus. But the relation of the text to the actual Jesus is that it is indeed *about him*. It is not irrelevant whether Jesus existed, did what he is purported to have done, died, and reestablished contact with his disciples after his death. And our assurance about these facts rests on the New

Testament testimony to them. But the texts give us no access to some faith-neutral, free-standing past individual to whom the texts are extrinsically related as "accounts" of the "really real." Faith created these texts and they intend to speak to and mediate faith. But it is not faith in general; it is faith in the actual, the real Jesus Christ, Messiah and Son of God.

B. The Historical Jesus

The term "the historical Jesus" has been used since the nineteenth-century "first quest for the historical Jesus" to refer to the actual pre-Easter Jesus.[14] In *The Revelatory Text* I suggested another use for that term that I think, if it were to be adopted, would help us avoid the positivist distortions I argued against in the previous section. History is not a record of "what actually happened." It is a written re-presentation or construction of that part of "what happened" to which the historian has access. This data is very limited, and by no means "the whole story."

First, the historian does not have access to the whole of any event, however restricted the event might be. Anyone can only look at any event from one angle at a time. Different witnesses give different accounts. Even if historians of the Jesus event had much more ample sources to work with than in fact they do they would still be able to offer only one possible representation of the story.

Second, the historian deals only with "historical" material, i.e., events that take place within the framework of time and space and causality. Much about the Jesus story exceeds these coordinates. That Jesus was conceived and born are historical facts. The incarnation of the Word of God is not. The incarnation is a trans-historical datum, intrinsic to the Jesus story, but not accessible, either as provable or disprovable, to the historian. The incarnation, in other words, is a mystery that is real but is not historical. The same can be said about the end of Jesus' life. His death on the cross is a historical event but his redemption of the world by that death is not. The experience of Jesus by his disciples after his death is historical but Jesus' resurrection is not. In other words, the historian who tries to establish, or disprove, the incarnation, the redemption, or the resurrection is outside his or her field.

Third, as the new historicists make us aware, even within the restricted sphere that is properly historical no two historians will re-present, or construct, the events in an identical way because the re-presentation is not a quasi-videotape account of free-standing events now immutably fixed in their entirety in some past "space" where they are undisturbed by present concerns. The re-presentation of the Jesus event by the present-day historian involves not only data the historian is able to retrieve by various methods (e.g., the examination of documents, archaeological sites, etc.) but also the whole tradition of how these data have been handled in the past (which the historian may accept, reject, revise, etc.), the lived interaction with the Jesus story by Christians and non-Christians in the intervening centuries, the historian's own concerns (which may include supporting, subverting, promulgating, purifying, etc., the traditional interpretations, engaging his or her own faith concerns, promoting her or his academic career, resourcing preaching, or any of a hundred other agendas), as well as the historian's own style and capabilities as a researcher and writer. And this is only a list of "typical" interacting factors influencing the construction of the account the historian will eventually offer.

The "historical Jesus," then, is the *literary construction,* or re-presentation, the historian creates concerning the actual pre-Easter Jesus, using whatever she or he considers relevant from the gospel accounts and/or other resources. Insofar as it is truly historical it cannot touch on the transhistorical aspects of the Jesus-event, on the faith claims of the Church about Jesus (except to present those claims as actual behavior of real Christians, not as true or false, etc.), nor can it go beyond his physical conception to say anything about his divine origin or beyond his death and burial to say anything of his resurrection, ascension, sending of the Spirit, or life "at God's right hand." In other words, the historical Jesus is not a person at all, much less the pre-Easter Jesus "as he really was," but a literary re-presentation of some aspects of the pre-Easter Jesus.

The earliest "versions" of the historical Jesus in this sense are to be found in the New Testament itself. The "problem" (which is really only a problem for a post-Enlightenment historical "quester") is that the evangelists never intended, or claimed, to present the historical Jesus to their readers. They told the Jesus-story, which included historical material. But that material was so suffused with theological interpretation, faith claims about Jesus, and lived experience of the post-Easter Jesus in the Christian community that extracting the "historical Jesus" from their accounts is actually only partially possible. Furthermore, what is extracted is not a picture of the real pre-Easter Jesus but an abstraction of certain data about his earthly career from the complex reality of the whole Jesus-event, which the evangelists do intend to present.

The modern attempts to reconstruct the "historical Jesus" (i.e., the earthly pre-Easter Jesus) in the form of a quasi-biography of Jesus that supplies his political affiliations, psychological-religious experience, and so on are not versions of the "real Jesus." They are imaginative re-presentations (even when solidly based on rigorous scholarly research into all the available data from the time of the pre-Easter Jesus). They attempt to reconstruct a rounded picture of Jesus as an earthly figure while abstracting from the non-historical aspects that completely suffuse the gospel accounts. The problem with this project is that even if one could construct a believable and relatively rounded "historical Jesus" it would not be the Jesus of faith and would not really tell us anything about the real Jesus that we need to know for the nourishment of our faith.

The historical Jesus of the gospels, i.e., *the literary material that bears upon the dimensions of the actual pre-Easter Jesus that are accessible to historical* *critical research,* is, nevertheless, important for two reasons. First, what we can know of the actual pre-Easter Jesus' teaching and practice is often *more* than, beyond, what our unaided humanity feels obliged to undertake and it therefore challenges our mediocrity. For example, Jesus' challenge of turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, forgiving the same offender an unlimited number of times, and giving more than is asked of us calls us beyond the simple human benevolence that is often the limit of our natural generosity. Or, again, through historical critical research we know that Jesus had women disciples (which was not customary for rabbis of his time) and that he dealt with them as he dealt with male disciples. This historical fact of Jesus' egalitarian practice continues to challenge the discrimination against women Christians by the official Church.

Second, what we know of the actual pre-Easter Jesus is often *less* than ordinary Christians or the official Church would like to claim on Jesus' authority and thus calls into question excessive dogmatism about teachings and practices that are not actually based on Scripture. For example, Jesus apparently said a great deal more about charity than about chastity, a proportion that has not always been maintained in quantity or quality by the institutional Church. Jesus nowhere in the gospels demands celibacy of those who preach in his name, condemns homosexuality, or excludes women from apostleship. Such teachings and practices that have developed in the course of history may or may not be legitimate, but they cannot be traced to Jesus. They have to be justified in some other manner. An appropriately critical reading of the New Testament texts cannot produce "proofs" for Jesus' personal institution of the seven sacraments, the infallibility of the Pope, or many other later developments in Church order and teaching that were once presented as clearly founded on the biblical text and have occasioned disastrous conflicts and disunity within the Church. Again, historical critical work on the foundational documents of Christianity can further the work of unity.

In summary, I am proposing that we discontinue the use of the term "the historical Jesus" for the actual, ontic pre-Easter Jesus, especially as a way of distinguishing the pre-Easter from the post-Easter Jesus. It would be more helpful to speak of the "historically available data about the pre-Easter Jesus that is linguistically embedded in the gospel texts." We could then reserve the term "the historical Jesus" for those non-scriptural constructions of the Jesus figure created by scholars, the very variety and non-reconcilability of which will keep us aware of the fact that they are not versions of the Gospel, much less accounts of the "real Jesus as he actually was," and even less as he actually is. They are historical reconstructions like a biography of Abraham Lincoln or Joan of Arc, often done by very careful scholars. They can supply a vast amount of interesting and useful information. But they do not verify, discredit, or supplement in essential ways the gospels.

C. The Proclaimed Jesus

The "real Jesus," the object of Christian faith, is what I have called "the proclaimed Jesus." This Jesus is the glorified, post-Easter Jesus who is the same Jesus who walked the land of Palestine in his pre-Easter career, just as the "real me" is the same person who once (but no longer) was five years old. He is *the actual, ontic Jesus who exists today* as *he is witnessed to by the Church and believed in by Christians.* The proclaimed Jesus includes whatever historical data is available about the pre-Easter Jesus (for example, that he was born sometime between 4 B.C.E. and 2 C.E., that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, that he was executed by crucifixion, etc.), the transhistorical dimensions of Jesus and his work (such as the truth that he is the incarnate Word of God, that he rose from the dead, that his death and resurrection are salvific), and his continued life in God and in his followers (i.e., the community of believers we call Church).

This proclaimed Jesus has changed over the centuries in some respects. The Church certainly knows, and therefore proclaims, *more* today about his pre-Easter earthly career than it could or did in the seventh, tenth, or eighteenth centuries. The Church has worked out theological formulas for unfolding the meaning of the claims about the transhistorical significance of Jesus and his work. And the Church itself has become a worldwide, highly institutionalized, diverse, and multicultural reality.

It must also be admitted that the proclaimed Jesus has sometimes been a *less* than totally faithful presentation of the real Jesus as the Church has gotten embroiled in dogmatic and institutional polemics that have distorted the face of Jesus for believers and outsiders alike. Certainly the Jesus proclaimed by the Church through the instrumentality of the Inquisition or the Crusades was a travesty of the God of universal compassion incarnated in Jesus. But what is important for our purposes in this book is that the proclaimed Jesus is the subject matter of the New Testament text as that text has functioned in the Church down through the centuries.

D. The Textual Jesus

Finally, we have to distintuish between the proclaimed Jesus who has varied to some extent throughout Christian history and the textual Jesus who is the proclaimed Jesus of the first Christian communities. By "canonizing" certain texts, especially the gospels, the Christian community consolidated for itself what it considered to be the non-negotiable, foundational proclamation of Jesus. This is what I have called the "textual Jesus," that is, *the normative proclaimed Jesus enshrined in the New Testament text.*

The importance of the textual Jesus is that the proclaimed Jesus of any age must be measured against this norm, i.e., the proclaimed Jesus of the text. Post-moderns are uncomfortable with a term like "norm" since it seems to fix in concrete some past standard that precludes or delegitimates ongoing development of faith. Such need not be the case if norm is properly understood. My identity as a human is the non-negotiable norm of my genuine development as a person. I will spend my life discerning the possibilities that that norm entails because they are theoretially infinite, at least in number. But it does preclude, one would hope, any number of lines of change, such as becoming a mass murderer or a racial bigot or an alcoholic or a total "couch potato" unresponsive to any claim upon me for social responsibility. In other words, my humanity is a norm against which I judge what constitutes development and what must be rejected as degeneration. There is no limit to development, but not all change is development and the function of the norm is to help us discern what constitutes genuine growth. In other words it precludes certain lines of change not because they are new but precisely because they are not development.

The same must be said of the foundational documents of a community, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. They norm authentic development of the nation in fidelity to its own identity and ideals. Our understanding of human dignity and the rights it entails has changed enormously since the eighteenth century when these documents were formulated, but a military dictatorship government or disenfranchising the handicapped are not among the possibilities conceivable in relation to the norm of our founding documents. The same must also be said of all that the Church proclaims down through the ages about Jesus and discipleship. The textual Jesus, his teaching and example, are the measure of what it means to be a Christian.

Without doubt, the Church has not always understood well or been faithful to the textual Jesus. Some developments have been against the norm of the textual Jesus or simply beside it. The struggle today over the full inclusion of women in the sacramental life of the Church witnesses to the possibility and actuality of misunderstanding and misuse of the biblical text for the power agenda of an elite. But the great importance and value of the text is precisely that such infidelity can be discerned, even if it takes a long time and much effort to finally rectify the course.

The discoveries and theories of the current "third quest" for the historical Jesus must finally come up against this norm. Christian faith does not terminate in a historical reconstruction of a first-century preacher, social activist, or thaumaturge who is dead, but in the real, actual, living Jesus who is accessible to us in the Church's proclamation insofar as that proclamation is faithful to the textual Jesus. Since fidelity is not static "copying" of first-century thought or practice, even in imitation of Jesus, but continual creative development of what it means to live his life in the present, continual and sophisticated study of the textual Jesus is crucial. The special importance of biblical specialists in the Church is that they are equipped by training and vocation to help interpret the text validly and, working with theologians, pastors, and the faithful in the Church, they thus ensure the fidelity of the proclaimed Jesus of today to the textual Jesus.

Such fidelity in no way limits the development of the Christian enterprise in response to the new concerns of the contemporary world. Ironically, it is the positivist historicism that wants to insist that the "real Jesus" is identical with and reducible to the first-century Palestinian Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, that finally immures Christianity in the past. The textual Jesus is the one who promised his Spirit to his disciples to "lead them into all truth" (cf. John 16:13). The Spirit will bring to the minds of Christians in each new age the aspects of the legacy of Jesus that will help them respond to new challenges, ones that the writers of the gospels could never have imagined. But even more importantly this Spirit is in fact, according to Christian faith, the presence of the real, living Jesus who continues to teach and lead his Church. What the Spirit inspires is not only the memory of one who once lived and is now dead but the living memory of one who continues in our midst.

When we ask, then, how the New Testament text is related to its subject matter, i.e., the real Jesus, the answer is complex and must be carefully nuanced. Looking "backward" in time we can say that in the *textual* Jesus the *actual* pre-Easter Jesus is subsumed into the *proclaimed* Jesus who exceeds what is *historically* available about him and includes the experience by the first generations of Christians of the actual pre- and post-Easter Jesus and their interpretations and formulations of that experience. Looking "forward" we can say that the textual Jesus, both pre- and post-Easter, both historical and transhistorical, of the New Testament functions as the norm of the continually evolving proclamation of and about Jesus who is the actual, glorified, and living Lord of all generations.

IV. The Replacement of "Authorial Intention" by "Ideal Meaning"

A second conceptual move I made in *The Revelatory Text* that some people have found helpful but that many students have struggled to grasp concerns the issue of "objectivity" in biblical interpretation. Literary criticism and philosophy of language have conspired to turn the attention of biblical scholars to the role of the reader in the process of interpretation. This is an important and valid development. As Bultmann pointed out long ago, there is no such thing as "presuppositionless" interpretation. But what we have come to realize in the years since Bultmann is that the reader brings far more to the text than intellectual presuppositions about cosmology, religion, or history. We also bring our race, gender, nationality, age, class, economic situation—in short, all that has come to be denoted by the code term "social location."[15]

Since the reader, who is always unique, works with the text in the construction of meaning no two interpretations of a text will be identical because no two readers are identical.[16] The problem this raises for biblical interpretation is that, unlike fictional literature, the biblical text, Christians believe, is meant to be determinative of their lives. Believing readers are not interested simply in theoretically possible meanings of the text (even valid ones), but in the "real meaning" intended by God "for the sake of our salvation."[17] Even readers sufficiently sophisticated to know that "real meaning" need not mean one fixed semantic message but can embrace multiple enriching and valid interpretations are convinced that the biblical text is not a Rorschach ink-blot that merely constellates the subjectivity of the viewers. This is the concern that gives rise to the question of "objectivity" in biblical interpretation. The question is: "Is there anything in the text that governs its interpretation and thereby rules out invalid interpretations and permits the text to say something to us that we do not project upon it?" Is the biblical text a real dialogue partner or a ventriloquist's dummy made to talk by the interpreter and saying nothing that the latter does not already think?

In the heyday of historical critical hegemony in the biblical academy the solution to this dilemma was the postulate of "the author's intention" as the norm of the "literal meaning." It was presumed that the biblical author(s) put into the text the meaning the reader was intended by God to receive and that meaning alone was the "real meaning" of the text.[18] The aim of biblical interpretation was to understand the text as the biblical author (e.g., Matthew or John) intended it to be understood. Authorial intention was a goal toward which all critics agreed they were striving. It meant that, theoretically, if all exegetes worked with the same text using the right methods in the right way they would all arrive at the same interpretation just as several chemists repeating an identical experiment would achieve identical results.[19] The fact that biblical scholars disagreed as often as or more often than they agreed in regard to particular texts was ascribed to the fact that they had not yet gotten the process right—or more exactly, that one scholar got it right and therefore all the others were simply wrong. The power of the positivist, even scientistic, model of knowledge in this position is clear.

The problem with this position is both practical and theoretical. Practically speaking, as historians have increasingly made us aware, it is simply impossible to arrive at (or at least to establish that one has arrived at) the meaning intended by the author. The subjective intellectual state of an ancient writer (to say nothing of the increased complexity in regard to texts redacted by numerous authors over hundreds of years) is simply no longer accessible to us no matter how sophisticated our methodology. Even if it were desirable to attain to authorial intention, it is not possible.

But the theoretical problem, of which literary critics and philosophers have made us aware, is that even if it were possible it would not be desirable. Texts do not derive their meaning from their author's intention even though, in successful writing, it begins there. Rather, meaning arises in the interaction between texts and readers. Strictly speaking, texts do not "mean" any more than musical scores "sound." They present possibilities for meaning the way a score offers the possibility for making music in a certain way. Meaning is not *in* texts but mediated *by* texts.

These realizations effectively subverted the "authorial intention" criterion of valid interpretation and left biblical readers with a new and post-critical version of the problem of "objectivity." How does one arrive at valid "real meaning(s)" of the text? And how does one know when that has occurred?

Some people, especially deconstructionists, would answer this question by simply asserting that there is no real meaning of a text. Any interpretation for which the exegete can supply good reasons (even those manifestly contrary to what the text obviously says) is as good, as valid, as any other interpretation. This effectively reduces the biblical text to pure indeterminacy. The text has nothing to say to which believers must listen as they listen to no other text. It does not mediate an encounter with a God who is someone other than a mere projection of oneself. Reading the text is simply a roundabout encounter with one's own subjectivity.

In the first edition of *The Revelatory Text* I attempted to mediate between the two extreme positions of the absolute authority of the "author's intention" and the reductionism of total indeterminacy by suggesting that there is an "objective pole" operative in the process of interpretation that corresponds to the "subjective pole" that is the reader in his or her uniqueness within the reading tradition of the Christian community. In chapter 5 I developed the notion of textual "ideal meaning" (suggested by Paul Ricoeur's treatment in *Theory of Interpretation*) as an alternative to authorial intention. The ideal meaning of the text acts as a norm of valid interpretation and governs, without suppressing, the range of possibilities of multiple interpretations.

Unfortunately, a number of readers unfamiliar with the Platonic notions of ideality and realization understood "ideal" to mean optimal or best or ultimately desirable. This is not what the word means philosophically and I was not trying to suggest that there is, in every text, a "best" meaning toward which all others tend or strive and against which they can be judged. This would amount to simply replacing the single standard of authorial intention with that of textual meaning, still assuming that there is in the text, independent of the reader, a free-standing meaning that exegesis aims to extract.

By "ideal meaning" I mean not a textual semantic content but a certain dynamic structure in the text that derives from the confluence of three factors: (a) the dialectic between sense and reference (explained in chapter 1) by which the text says something intelligible about something (even if what it says is false); (b) the genre in which the intelligible utterance is expressed and by which it is shaped; (c) the personal style of the author. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 involves a dialectic between what is said (the story) and its referent (what being a neighbor actually means) that intends to say something intelligible about something, namely that the true keeping of the second commandment of the Law consists in actively serving the neighbor in need (whether or not this is true). This truth claim is expressed in the genre of a parable, which allows for its openness and relevance to a wide variety of situations beyond that of a victim of road violence. And it is written in the literary style of the author of Luke. The confluence of these three factors gives the text of the Good Samaritan a dynamic structure that guides interpretation of the passage in a certain direction. This structure internal to the text is what I mean by "ideal meaning."

There are numerous possible interpretations of this parable. One could discuss whether it is hyperbolic and therefore not meant to be taken "at the letter" but to point toward the fullness of the Law, whether the priest and Levite stand condemned or are merely less than perfect in their observance of the Law, whether the parable is really about how God treats us in our fallenness or about how we should actually deal with one another (or both), and so on. The ideal meaning can be realized, that is, "made real" or concrete in the here and now, in a number of interpretations that will vary according to the interpreter, the situation of the interpretation, and other factors.[20] This parable will undoubtedly be read differently in a poor Latin American *barrio* than in a white suburban U.S. parish. But the ideal meaning rules out certain lines of interpretation. Someone who suggests that the parable is a condemnation of Samaritanism, or that its message is that a fool (the Samaritan) is soon parted from his money but that reasonable religion (that of the priest and Levite) is what God really approves of since they are obviously in good standing with the Law, or that it was a political protest against inadequate police protection on the open roads, is simply missing the point.

All of the arts corroborate this notion of "ideal meaning." The musical score is a clear example. We listen to Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony" over and over, played by different orchestras, both because it is always the same and because it is always different. Beethoven's "Fifth" cannot be played any way at all. If the rendition sounds like "Yankee Doodle Dandy" we dismiss it as invalid. On the other hand, if the rendition is a wooden reproduction of some other performance we dismiss it as inadequate. In this sense all renditions should sound alike, that is, they should each realize the ideal structure inscribed in the score, but every rendition should also be unique and original because of the interpretation by a particular conductor and orchestra.

Perhaps the best example of "ideal meaning" or governing structure that can be realized in almost infinite variety is the game. Tennis does not "really" exist until it is played—or more exactly, it exists only as "ideal" until it is made "real" or realized in the playing. No two games of tennis will be identical. But the ideal structure, when it is realized, marks this encounter as tennis rather than football or swimming, chess or poker. And it makes all games of tennis, in one sense, alike even though each is utterly unique.

To speak, then, of "ideal meaning" in the biblical text is not to say that there is a free-standing meaning embedded in the text that any valid interpretation will unearth. We are not talking about "ideal interpretation" as a value judgment on the exegete's performance. Rather, interpretation is the realizing in a single, concrete, and unique form (this interpretation) of the ideal meaning (the inner governing structure) of the text. This means that there will be some way in which all valid interpretations of a particular text will be "the same," not as identical (any more than two games of tennis are identical or two renditions of Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony") but by a "family resemblance" based on the literary "genes" of the text itself.

This replacement of authorial intention by ideal meaning as the touchstone of objectivity allows for both the possibility of multiple valid interpretations that literary scholars rightly insist characterizes all texts and for the "norming" of interpretation by the text itself, which is thereby enabled to speak for itself and not simply as a projection of the interpreter. The orchestra playing Beethoven both "invents" the piece insofar as the interpretation is unique and original and is "subject" to the score it did not write. The biblical scholar both "creates" the interpretation of the text, which may be very original, and submits to the text's own dynamics, which the interpreter did not invent. There is, in other words, an "objective pole" constituted by the text that corresponds to the "subjective pole" constituted by the reader and the interaction between them is the emergence of meaning through interpretation.

V. Faith and the Public Character of Biblical Interpretation

A final sphere of discussion to which *The Revelatory Text* has given rise concerns the role of faith in the act of interpretation. A number of scholars who are people of faith placing their scholarship at the service of the Church have asked me why I did not manage to find a way to "save" all of the traditional theological affirmations about Scripture, e.g., "inerrancy." Others, notably scholars of religion, took offense at the very title of chapter 3, "The New Testament as the Church's Book," since all literature, once published, is in the public domain and interreligious dialogue has opened all sacred texts beyond the communities that produced or live by them. Once again, I was attempting to mediate between two often antagonistic positions, each of which is valid, and which I believe do not have to cancel each other out in theory or in practice. This mediation is part of the overall attempt of the book to place a faith-inspired interpretation in the public forum of academic discourse. It may be useful to make explicit here what I proposed more indirectly by the theory developed in the book.

The claim that the New Testament is "the Church's book," as I tried to explain in the first part of chapter 3, does not and cannot mean that the Church somehow "owns" the text, determines who may and may not read or interpret it, or even that the Church has the sole voice in deciding the validity of interpretations. It means that the Church community and the New Testament are reciprocally related in a unique way that is not shared by those who are not part of the believing community. This unique relationship consists in the fact that the community that produced this text now accepts it as its foundational document that both generates it and norms its life. And the the text itself grows and develops through the ongoing practice in life of what it generates and norms. In other words, the Church that produced the text placed itself under the guidance of this text and as it lives that guidance it enters more deeply into the meaning of the text, even to the point of understanding the text better than its original writers did and having to modify the originally constructed meaning of some of the text.

The analogy I used, which I think is valid and illuminating, is that of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States in relation to the American people as a nation. The first Americans wrote the documents, but once they had produced them they placed themselves under the guidance of these documents that have become normative of national identity and practice. However, as Americans lived that guidance and measured their living by this norm they came to understand more deeply the implications of what the founders had written and have since expanded and even modified the texts. In a very real way Americans today understand the meaning of the foundational documents better than did the framers of the Constitution because the effective history of the documents has gradually made explicit what was implicit or even merely potential, both positive and negative, in those documents.

Given the special reciprocal relationship between the New Testament and the believing community we call Church we cannot avoid the question of what effect, if any, faith has on interpretation. Is faith *required* for valid interpretation? Is faith an *obstacle* to objective interpretation? Is faith *irrelevant* to interpretation? At different times in history each of these options has been espoused exclusively and the effect of the overemphasis on the option has not been helpful. Those who would make faith a requirement often reduce the biblical text to an arsenal of proof-texts for dogmatic agendas not derived from the texts themselves. Those who regard any kind of faith commitment as a threat to scientific objectivity introduce into biblical interpretation the split between mind and heart, between sense and sensibility, that has been the primary negative effect of Enlightenment positivism in the humanities in general. Those who consider faith irrelevant to interpretation have arbitrarily chosen to ignore what the text plainly claims to be about, much like the interpreter of *Hamlet* who considers tragedy an irrelevant category in the field of literature.

This discussion has often been prosecuted under the rubric of "faith and reason" or, more recently, "faith and science." I think that this way of proceeding distracts from the real question. Faith is (or at least can be in its better representatives) an eminently reasonable enterprise. And reason, whatever its premises, is laced with faith. Atheism, after all, is as much a faith position as theism since the nonexistence of God is no more "provable" than the existence of God. Reasoning involves faith in all manner of unprovable postulates, as Descartes' abortive project of establishing the absolutely indubitable first principle eventually made clear.

In my opinion, the better formulation of the discussion is the inquiry about the relationship, not of faith and reason, but of faith and scholarship. The question is really about whether faith is a purely private experience, devoid of noetic content, a kind of distracting intellectual "white noise" that is best kept out of the scholarly sphere or a serious, contributing partner in the academic enterprise. And this is the question that reverberates in the background of *The Revelatory Text* from beginning to end. My concern is to validate the role of faith in the interpretive endeavor, or, to put it another way, to make faith an explicit player in the public sphere of academic discourse.

In order to make the case for this position I attempted to make some nuanced distinctions about faith itself at the end of chapter 2 and the ways in which faith can function in interpretation at the end of chapter 3. I will not repeat those distinctions here. Rather, at this juncture I want to make a more general point about the relationship of personal convictions and commitments to scholarship.

People in our culture in general, including academics, are beginning to recoil from the extreme compartmentalization of Enlightenment rationalism with its over-specialization of disciplines and its rigid objectivism of investigation. We are increasingly convinced that knowledge matters, not just because of what it can produce, give power over, or undermine. It matters to the people who know. The "mattering" of knowledge is what we call meaning and a worthwhile life is essentially an adventure into meaning. Faith is a meaning structure, or a way of structuring life according to the meanings one finds most compelling in relation to questions of ultimate importance. To try to banish this factor from our scholarship is hardly possible, even if it were desirable, and, I would maintain, it is not desirable. The more "wholly" or "holistically" we come to our academic work, bringing not only a disembodied intellect but our bodies, our gender, our social commitments, our ethnic and national belonging, and so on, the more richly we can understand and contribute to understanding. Faith belongs to that "totality" of the reading self and, properly exercised, enriches and guides the reading.

The question is, what does "properly exercised" entail? This is the point at which the issue of the "public" character of interpretation becomes important. If biblical scholars are going to function as scholars and not merely as in-house functionaries of various denominations, they must engage in a discourse that is open to all hearers with the requisite academic preparation. Obviously this entails carrying on their work according to accepted methods and submitting it to peer review. But it also entails, in my opinion, a sincere effort to speak a public language in the academic forum. And speaking a public language is rooted in reasoning "from below," that is, beginning one's investigations with data that is intersubjectively available rather than with faith propositions or dogmatic affirmations whose authority is by definition ascribed rather than established by evidence and argumentation.

This suggests to me that propositions such as the "inerrancy" of Scripture need to be either completely reformulated or abandoned because the postulate of an inerrant text, given the historically developmental character of language, is virtually self-contradictory. One might be able to assign an acceptable meaning to such a term in the in-house forum of a religious denomination in which it functions within a network of faith propositions that make it intelligible. But there is probably no way to make it function helpfully in the academic context in which language and texts are understood as limited, human artifacts that are, by nature, subject to error. Attempting to make such exclusively faith-based terminology part of the scholarly discourse is, in my judgement, what militates against the acceptance of a positive role for faith in scholarship. It is this type of attempt that leads some scholars to banish faith from the academic forum as obscurantist or oppressive.

Faith, however, is not limited to credal or dogmatic affirmations. Both the religious stance toward life and even much of the explicit content of faith itself can be made comprehensible to the interlocutor who does not share one's commitment if one is willing to make the effort that is required and to refrain from the religious imperialism that intends conversion or conquest rather than conversation and mutual understanding. A non-American can understand what democracy is all about even if he or she remains convinced that socialism is a superior form of government. Faith as a personal commitment is non-communicable, but faith as an existential coordinate of life and as a tradition involving truth claims can be represented in the public forum in non-distorting and non-oppressive ways.

In short, I am convinced that, on the one hand, for the Christian interpreter faith is not a detachable accessory that can be checked at the door on the way into the academic forum. It is as much part of who the interpreter is, and therefore as relevant and potentially enriching (and potentially distorting) for interpretation, as her or his social location. Furthermore, given the subject matter of the biblical text whose intention is to evoke, nourish, and strengthen faith, banishing faith from the conversation is counterintuitive and even violent. The biblical interpreter needs and has a right to the explicit functioning of her or his faith in the task of interpretation.

On the other hand, the academy needs the contribution of faith just as the physical sciences need ethical commitment and the social sciences compassion. What we need in the academy is not an either/or choice between faith and scholarship but careful attention to the canons that must guide and criticize the functioning of faith within the academic enterprise, canons comparable in scope and general acceptance to those that govern the function of method, the role of evidence, and other factors in the search for truth. Just as feminist interpreters must be not only critical of patriarchal texts but self-critical of feminist premises, so religiously committed interpreters must be not only critical of secularist premises but also self-critical about dogmatic premises or evangelical projects masquerading as faith.

My original commitment in writing *The Revelatory Text* has not changed, even though I have been much enlightened by the discussions its publication has engendered. I am still convinced that the interpretation of the New Testament as sacred scripture, that is, as a privileged place of encounter between the believer and God, is possible. It is much more complex and difficult in a post-Enlightenment and now post-modern context. But it may be that it is even more important now than it was in the "ages of faith." The cultural stakes are higher at the end of a century in which we have had to recognize our own capacity to destroy ourselves but our incapacity, finally, to save ourselves. We know now that knowledge can kill as readily as it can give life. It is only the truth that can finally make us free and for Christians that Truth has a name. It is the name of Jesus, the one who said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Notes

1. A good exposure to the variety of new methods is Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). Two volumes devoted to particular methods in their diversity are Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), primarily on reader response criticism, and Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994) describing various literary-critical strategies. A volume demonstrating a variety of methods for the interpretation of the same texts is Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
2. See, e.g., Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *"What Is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, SBL Symposium Series, No. 3 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996) and *"What Is John?" Volume II, Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, SBL Symposium Series, No. 7 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998).
3. Daniel Patte, in the Appendix to his forthcoming book, *The Challenge of Discipleship: A Critical Study of the Sermon on the Mount As Scripture* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1999), explicitly dialogues with *The Revelatory Text* and proposes that pragmatic interpretation carries the hermeneutical project further by allowing the text to read the reader's life even as the reader reads the text. I am in complete agreement with him on the subject. Although I probably assumed that the transformative "fusion" of horizons between reader and text (which, as he points out, can be either harmonious or conflictual or both) achieves itself in practice, his distinction between hermeneutics and pragmatics can significantly sharpen the discussion.

   Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger in "'How Can This Be?' (John 3:9): A Feminist-Theological Re-Reading of the Gospel of John," *"What Is John?" Volume II*, 19–41, takes the same approach in regard to the texts about women in the gospel of John.

   Another biblical scholar emphasizing and illustrating this approach is Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 1993), working in the context of South African biblical liberation studies.

4. Amos N. Wilder, "Introduction to the Reissue, 1971," in *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) xi–xxx.
5. *Le Texte de la Rencontre: L'interprétation du Nouveau Testament comme écriture sainte*, translated by Jean-Claude Breton and Dominique Barrios-Delgado, LD 161 (Paris: Cerf/Fides, 1995).
6. *Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)* of Vatican II is available in English in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin P. Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1996) 97–115.
7. This "third quest" has been chronicled and discussed by Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997) and Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994).
8. A highly critical evaluation of the quest is Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).
9. The two most inspiring popular studies are probably Marcus J. Borg's *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994). Luke Timothy Johnson has followed his highly critical and polemical work on the Jesus Seminar with a much more constructive approach to the gospels and their mediation of Jesus, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

   More academically slanted, and controversial, are the volumes of J. Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [a still incomplete multivolume work] (New York: Doubleday, 1991); N. T. Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).
10. Marcus J. Borg discusses this distinction in a number of places, but a clear presentation can be found in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, especially ch. 2. He takes up the same distinction in *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) 91–94, in relating Jesus to God.
11. For those unfamiliar with this term and the discussion it denotes a clear and accessible presentation of the "New Historicism" is provided by Herbert Lindenberger, "Toward a New History in Literary Study," *Profession* 89 (1989) 16–23. Biblical scholars can anticipate a cogent relating of new historicism to biblical interpretation in the forthcoming volume on the subject by Gina Hens-Piazza in the Fortress "What Is . . . ?" series.
12. I am not nearly as complacent or sanguine as L. T. Johnson, *Living Jesus* 28–32, about the development of the canon.
13. Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 13–14.
14. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, with an introduction by James M. Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1968) [original German publication 1906] supplied the history of the "quest" from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century.
15. For a major study of the effect of social location on interpretation see the papers edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Reading from this Place*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).
16. Actually, biblical scholars have come rather tardily to this realization, following literary critics who have been exploring reader response for decades and art critics who have developed refined theories of how the viewer enters into and participates in the creation of the work of art. Some illuminating essays on this subject are collected in Rosemary Crumlin, *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination* (Australia: National Gallery of Victoria, 1998).
17. Cf. *Dei Verbum* III, 11.
18. This understanding of authorial intention as the norm of meaning was, at the beginning, liberating, especially for Catholic biblical scholars, because it freed interpretation from dogmatically

controlled exegesis. This norm of authorial intention was actually reaffirmed in *Dei Verbum* III, 11–12, referencing *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) and its predecessor, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893). Many mainstream scholars have, however, moved beyond this position that, in fact, locks the meaning of the text into the past.

19. It is well to note that such an idea would have seemed bizarre to the patristic and medieval interpreters who believed that all texts have more than one meaning even for the individual interpreter, to say nothing of a succession of interpreters. The ideal of a scientifically exact single meaning is an effect in the area of humanistic study of the Enlightenment-generated scientific model, not a self-evident and always recognized understanding of interpretation.

    For a fuller treatment of the patristic-medieval approach see Sandra M. Schneiders, "Senses of Scripture," *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism,* ed. Richard P. McBrien (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) 1175–1176.

20. This interaction between textual ideal meaning and the reader's situation is where I would locate the pragmatic concern that I see as intrinsic to hermeneutical engagement of the text.

Introduction

A. Genesis of the Project

The seed of this book was sown over fifteen years ago when, as a graduate student in New Testament and Christian spirituality, I tried to answer my real questions about scripture with the scholarly tools I was being taught. I went to Paris, to Institut Catholique, in 1968 just as the student revolution reached its peak in the demand for a new, less authoritarian and elitist, approach to the intellectual life of the universities and just as the liberating results of the Second Vatican Council were beginning to be felt in Catholic universities, especially in the field of biblical studies, as an openness to less dogmatically controlled scholarly endeavor. These two historical developments combined to energize the wholehearted espousal of historical critical, that is, rigorously scientific, exegetical work by Catholic biblical scholars.

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Catholic biblical studies in the sixties and early seventies was a field dominated by and even intoxicated with historical criticism. Structuralism, which was a major interest in secular studies in France, had a few serious advocates in the biblical field. Literary approaches to the biblical text were being hesitantly tried here and there. Psychoanalytic, psychological, and sociological approaches were on the horizon, but that planet of the human sciences would not rise in the methodological sky of biblical studies for some years. Ideology criticism in general and feminism in particular were nowhere to be seen in the world of biblical scholarship.

In 1972 I went to Rome for doctoral studies at the Gregorian University and the Biblicum. The situation was not much different. Although the wave of methodological diversification that is reaching full tide today was rising, it was still so far out at sea that only the most farsighted could suspect that it was more than a ripple. I certainly had no idea that the universal and virtually exclusive allegiance of my professors in Paris and Rome to historical criticism would ever be open to question, and I could not have suggested a question if I had been asked.

I was convinced that the dominant methodology was adequate to answer my questions if I could only figure out how to ask them within its framework.

Like my classmates, especially those of us old enough at the time to remember the dogmatism that dominated Catholic theology, including biblical studies, prior to Vatican II, I was enormously impressed and excited by the seemingly daily revelations emanating from biblical research. Our professors were some of the major figures in the field, and they were pursuing an agenda that had been deferred for half a century by hesitant and even repressive ecclesiastical authority. Historical criticism was raising and answering questions that were astounding, and we had more than enough to do to learn its methods and try to assimilate its findings.

However, I found myself increasingly plagued by questions that seemed to have no answers. Once in Paris, in a graduate seminar in Old Testament exegesis, I asked my brilliant and justly famous professor (a man of deep religious conviction) what implication the fact that the Old Testament was inspired had for our interpretation of the text. He replied simply, *"Rien de tout."* I filed this answer in the mental drawer labeled only with a large question mark. I had no idea what the hermeneutical implications of inspiration might be, but it seemed strange that, if the very reason for our interest in this text was that it was somehow "the word of God," this theological fact had no significance for the interpretation of the text.

By the time I started my dissertation in Rome, I knew that my real interest in the New Testament arose from my interest in spirituality, that is, in the lived experience of the faith. I believed, with Vatican II's document on divine revelation, that scripture was a "pure and lasting fount of spiritual life"[1] and that it was somehow a privileged locus of the transforming encounter between God and the believer. But there seemed no legitimate way to introduce this interest or conviction into my study of the New Testament. Indeed, the type of objectivity that was the ideal of historical critical exegesis and that controlled its agenda and methodology seemed to forbid, if not any interest in such matters, at least any explicit intrusion of such concerns into the scholarly study of the text.

It became increasingly clear to me that the dimension of the text that most interested me could not be accessed by the methods I was learning. But there were no other methods that were academically respectable and I was not willing to abandon a serious scholarly approach to the text in favor of what, historically, had been called "spiritual exegesis," an approach that was notoriously susceptible to pious eisegesis and exegetical fantasy, or even "existential exegesis" in the Bultmannian sense, which was tied to a problematic philosophical position and cultural analysis. Historical critical work on the New Testament was rigorous in method, enticing in its possibilities, and amazingly illuminating in its results. But it seemed limited to answering questions about the first century. Somehow, though nearly infinite regress toward and beyond Christian origins seemed possible, methodologically justified progress from the text into the present of lived experience seemed impossible.

It was not until I began my own teaching career in the ecumenical, interreligious, and university setting of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, that I began to realize that the questions I had been raising actually belonged to the field of inquiry called hermeneutics, a subject in which (to my retrospective amazement) I had not had a single course during my biblical formation. Much later I came to realize that the apparent ignoring of the hermeneutical dimension of biblical studies was not merely (although it was to some extent) a function of the total absorption of the best Catholic biblical scholars in catching up with their Protestant colleagues who had been involved with the higher criticism for decades; it was a prudent avoidance of the types of questions most likely to reactivate the defensiveness of ecclesiastical authorities.

As I plunged into the reading of Fuchs, Ebeling, Robinson, Funk, Wilder, Ott, Hopper, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Perrin, and the theorists of language in general and symbol, metaphor, and imagination in particular, the path toward some answers began to open. At the same time, some of my American colleagues were experimenting with new and exciting methods of biblical interpretation: literary criticism of the type practiced in literature departments (rather than the "literary criticism" of traditional biblical scholarship), especially structuralist and narrative analysis, rhetorical criticism, and audience-oriented approaches; sociological and social world analysis; and psychological interpretation.

Meanwhile, my own feminist consciousness, which had emerged during the Roman years, came to full bloom. The biblical text, for which I still had a deep love, was revealing itself to me as not only an androcentric and patriarchal document but one that had played and continues to play a major role in causing and legitimating the oppression of women in families, churches, and societies. The question of biblical interpretation took on a political and ecclesiastical urgency that augmented my religious concern.

Over the last ten years I have been trying, with the help of students and colleagues, to formulate and refine the questions about the biblical text that I really wanted to ask and to assemble the resources for answering them. Today I would say that the question is simply, What is involved in an integral, that is, a transformative, interpretation of the biblical text? My answer, in a nutshell, is that integral transformative interpretation is an interaction between a self-aware reader open to the truth claims of the text and the text in its integrity, that is, an interaction that adequately takes into account the complex nature and multiple dimensions of the text and the reader. Traditional historical critical exegesis, because it deals with the text only as an historical document, is necessary but not sufficient for integral interpretation.

The task that began to take shape was one of determining the major aspects and dimensions of the text that had to be taken into account not serially but in interrelationship to each other and hypothesizing about how this could be done with appropriate methodological rigor. While I certainly do not think that I have accomplished this task, I am bold enough to hope that this study will offer a preliminary sketch for an interdisciplinary theory of biblical hermeneutics that can ground a coherent methodological pluralism. I hope that the proposed hypothesis will generate further discussion of the topic, which is now "out in the open" in many circles within the biblical academy.

B. Effects of Social Location on the Study

My purpose in briefly recounting my own intellectual and spiritual journey from the barely formulated questions of my first days in graduate school to the completion of this manuscript has been to dispel that illusion of anonymous, objectively authoritative, and disinterested scholarship that written texts in general, and academic ones in particular, seem to generate. By revealing my own historical development and social location with its particular limitations, interests, and inevitable blind spots I intend to invite my reader into a critical dialogue that I anticipate will involve questioning and disagreement. As a white, middle class, First World, European educated, feminist member of a Roman Catholic women's religious congregation who is both a professional in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and spirituality and a committed believer, my approach to the admittedly vast subject matter of this book is perspectival and interested.

Though every aspect of social location has its effect on scholarship, I would call attention to the effect on this text of certain features of my own particular situation. First, I write as a Roman Catholic. Thus, I tend to approach certain theological questions predominantly, although not exclusively, in terms of the history of these questions in my own tradition and the way they affect that tradition today. This is both because I am more familiar with and competent in regard to the Catholic tradition and because I have an investment in its development.

Second, I am a white, middle class, First World woman. This means that I have both benefited from certain advantages in my personal and academic development and experienced the discrimination that the Roman Catholic church and the academy still visit upon women. In some ways this is a self-balancing combination because I am both the beneficiary and the victim of the current social structures within which I work. I hope that this sensitizes me, not only to my own oppression, but also to that of women and men whose deprivation, whether I like it or not, is integral to my affluence.

Third, and largely because of the fact just mentioned, I am a feminist, that is, one who is actively committed to the full personhood and equality of all people and particularly of the people who are at the bottom of every oppressed group, namely, women.

Above all, this book is motivated by my particular, indeed passionate, interest in the possibility of the Bible's, especially the New Testament's, functioning as locus and mediation of revelatory encounter with God, that is, as revelatory text, for its readers. The readers I have in mind are both scholars (beginning and more experienced), whose exacting demands for scholarly rigor in exegesis and criticism I respect and share, and the nonscholarly but healthily critical lay readers whose primary concern is the text's capacity to nourish and inform personal and communal spirituality.

In both groups the people I am personally most concerned to serve are those, especially feminist women, who are increasingly alienated from a text that is correctly seen, on the one hand, as androcentric and patriarchal and, on the other hand, as a primary and privileged connection with the spiritual tradition to which, as Christians, they and I belong. My hope is that an integral hermeneutical theory can ground a transformational hermeneutical praxis that will make the biblical text available as a faith resource to the oppressed as well as to the privileged among its readers.

C. Style, Research Aids, Usage

Throughout the text I have chosen to avoid the magisterial *we* that has often been part of the literary genre of scholarly discourse. When I am speaking for myself as the individual writer of this text, I generally use the first person singular, with the hope that the reader will critically assess what I am saying as the (I dare to hope grounded) position of one person. I reserve *we* for occasions on which I include myself with the reader in the progression of thought and argument.

For a number of reasons, first and foremost readability, I have decided to keep the notes to a minimum. Given the number of fields from which the material in this study is derived, any attempt to recognize, much less engage, the range of discussion in each area would have so overloaded the text with notes that it would have been more ponderous than enlightening. Consequently, the notes are used for three limited and specific purposes: first, to acknowledge sources that are explicitly cited; second, and very rarely, to augment the text with comments that would have been distracting if included in the text itself; third, and most important, to indicate accessible and reliable resources, often of an introductory nature, by which the reader can pursue topics that are important for the argument but that cannot be treated historically or exhaustively without unduly enlarging the text.

The notes, therefore, which give each reference (except those listed in the Abbreviations) in full the first time it is used in each chapter, constitute an annotated bibliography that is a very select, and quite basic, reading list for readers who want to educate themselves in the field of biblical hermeneutics. Anyone in the field will not only recognize but probably will have read most of these works. But the "beginner," including not only students but scholars who are approaching the hermeneutical discussion from specializations in other areas of biblical studies, can be overwhelmed with the amount of material in this rapidly developing field. The notes are intended as a basic road map of the territory to orient first-time visitors.

I have attempted to press language and orthography into theological use in order to create a kind of shorthand for handling certain recurring problems and ambiguities. Since some of this usage runs counter to what has been customary, the reader must be forewarned against confusion.

In speaking of the Bible as it existed prior to the rise of Christianity and as it is used today among Jews, I use the term *Jewish scriptures.* This usage is somewhat anachronistic because the term *Jewish* postdates the composition of much of this biblical material; however, it seems the best of several possibilities. The more accurate designation, "the scriptures of the community of Israel," is too cumbersome for repeated use. *Hebrew scriptures* is inaccurate for two reasons: first, not all of this biblical material was composed in Hebrew; second, the text often used by the early Christians and upon which many of the Christian translations of the Old Testament were based was the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the scriptures of Israel. Therefore, I use *Jewish scriptures* to designate the Bible of the Jews (which, of course, does not include the New Testament) and *Old Testament* when I am speaking of the first testament in Christian Bibles. The Jewish scriptures, in other words, as I use the term, is equivalent to the Old Testament (including the apocrypha) for Christians but to the Bible for Jews.

Three theological terms raise particular problems because they designate at times a fundamental Christian theological reality and at other times the limited historical manifestations of that reality. I have attempted to solve this problem by spelling the term with a capital letter when it refers to the theological reality in itself and with a lowercase letter when it refers to the historical realizations of that reality.

First, *Church* with a capital letter refers (contrary to much contemporary usage) to the mystery of divine communion that is shared by all those baptized into Christ. I spell the term with a lowercase *c* when it refers to particular churches (e.g., Pauline church), local churches (e.g., the church of Jerusalem), various denominations (e.g., Roman Catholic church or Lutheran church). Furthermore, in referring to the Church or the churches I use *it* and *its* rather than the feminine pronoun or adjective to avoid the sexist feminization of humanity in relation to (a male) deity and the evocation of the prophetic metaphor whose equation of idolatry with female adultery is so offensive to many feminists.

Again, contrary to much contemporary usage, the term *Gospel,* with a capital letter, is reserved for the mystery of salvific revelation in Jesus (e.g., the Gospel is good news for all people). The term is spelled with a lowercase *g* to denote various forms of the Gospel (e.g., the gospel of John, the third gospel, the gospel accounts of the resurrection).

Finally, *Tradition* is spelled with a capital letter when it refers to the substantial gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church (that which Jesus "handed over" as source of fidelity to himself in succeeding generations) and with a lowercase *t* when the term refers to particular traditions or modes of traditioning such as the dogmatic formulation of tradition.

A particularly knotty problem arises around the expression *word of God.* Although capitalizing both substantives has the advantage of making the phrase a single theological term that can be used as a synonym for the Bible or scripture, it has the disadvantage of prejudicing some important theological discussions, for example, to what extent and in what way certain parts of the Bible are inspired, revealed, or authoritative. To speak of scripture as purely and simply the "Word of God" almost inevitably leads to fundamentalistic conclusions that I am concerned to avoid. Consequently, I reserve *Word of God* to denote the Second Person of the Trinity; Jesus as this Person incarnate; and the mystery of divine self-revelation whether in scripture, in Jesus, or in some other realization. I use the lowercased expression, *word of God,* to speak of scripture, that is, the book itself or its reading or proclamation, as potentially or actually revelatory when I wish to leave open the theological questions. Thus, I would say, for example, that the reading of the word of God in the liturgy may or may not be an occasion for the encounter between a believer and the Word of God.

The reader will note that examples from the New Testament are often drawn from the fourth gospel and that the case study in chapter 7 is an interpretation of a Johannine text. This is because my own research and teaching specialization has been in the fourth gospel, and I have, therefore, done much more reflection on this material than on other parts of the New Testament. However, I am firmly convinced that the theory being developed in this study is applicable to the New Testament as a whole, even though the methodological approach to various books and parts of books would vary.

With these introductory remarks I invite the reader to accompany me on a journey into the still largely uncharted landscape of biblical hermeneutics.

Notes

1. *DV* VI, 21.

PART I

The New Testament as Sacred Scripture

1

The Problem and Project of New Testament Interpretation

A. Introduction to the Project

This book is about the relationship between the New Testament and its readers. Of course, much of what will be said applies also to the relationship between readers and the whole of the Christian Bible. However, because the Old Testament[1] was composed over a much longer period of time, deals with a much more extensive historical subject matter, and presents a much wider range of literary forms, a systematic attempt to include it in our development would introduce into our considerations complications that would distract from the primary concern of the study without contributing proportionately to the achievement of its purposes. The New Testament, comprising twenty-seven short books that deal with a restricted period of history (approximately 30 to 100 C.E. if one excludes the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke) and were composed within a relatively short span of time (the fifties to approximately 120 C.E.), is not only more manageable but is also the part of the Bible that bears most directly on the life of Christian individuals and communities. As will become clear, it is the relationship between the Bible and believing Christians, both scholars and lay readers, that is the primary, although not exclusive, focus of attention in these pages.

Readers of the New Testament approach it from different *perspectives* and with different *objectives* in view. Some readers are believers who seek from the New Testament sustenance for their spiritual lives; others are nonbelievers, some of whom read with openness in hopes of finding something true and worthwhile for themselves in a book that has meant so much to so many people and some of whom are convinced that this book is false or even evil in content and who read it in order to reinforce their own convictions and find ways to convince others of their position.

Some readers of the New Testament approach it primarily as scholars whose primary concern is neither edification by nor polemic against the content of the New Testament but rather a scientifically objective interpretation of the text. Among such scholars there are many who are believers and some who are not. Those who are not approach the biblical text as they would any other ancient document whose content they wish to understand but that does not necessarily make any personal claim on them. But even among believing biblical scholars there are those who acknowledge the relationship between faith and the Bible but do not think that that relationship has any practical bearing on the scholarly task of exegeting the text. They would assign to theologians the task of incorporating the objective findings of biblical scholarship into the understanding of faith and to pastors the task of applying these findings to the life of the Christian community.[2] However, there are other believing scholars who think that their faith and that of the Church must play an integral role in valid interpretation and that this in no way prejudices the scholarly objectivity of their work.

Not only do readers differ in their perspectives on the text and in the purposes for which they read and/or study it, they also differ in their *conceptions of the text* itself. At one end of the spectrum are those who hold that the Bible was written by individuals who were directly, immediately, and verbally inspired by God and therefore that the text is literally the Word of God. In such a view every word of scripture is equally and absolutely revelatory and authoritative and the only task of the reader is to decipher the literal (i.e., the lexical and grammatical and/or authorially intended) sense of the words and the units they compose and to submit to that "meaning." There are numerous more nuanced variations of this basic fundamentalistic position. Today it is probably the case that most fundamentalistically inclined readers are at least aware of the importance of historical and literary context in determining the literal meaning of any text, even one that is thought to be verbally inspired, and that this awareness plays some role in their interpretation.[3]

At the other end of the spectrum are those, usually nonbelieving scholars, who hold that from the standpoint of the scholar the Bible is purely and simply a book like other books. It was written by human beings using human language to talk about human experience, and it can only be interpreted by applying to it all and only those methods, literary and historical, that are used to interpret any other ancient text.

Between these two extreme positions are believers who know that, however this text is related to God, it is also a human document that must be approached with all the methodological sophistication at our disposal, and scholars who believe that, no matter how important the scientific approach to the text might be for determining its meaning, this book is somehow different from other texts because of its role of mediation between God and the believing community. Many of the latter, however, generally content themselves with a fervent avowal of their reverence for the text as the word of God but carry on their scholarly pursuits in a manner indistinguishable from that of the nonbelieving scholar. This is perhaps a tenable position for the biblical academician who does not carry pastoral responsibilities and whose own faith has adequate nonbiblical supports, but there are others, usually pastors and/or theologians, who must mediate between the academy and the community of believers.

This book is addressed primarily to the people described in this last paragraph: intelligent and educated believers who wonder how sound biblical criticism can be incorporated into a faith-filled and faith-enhancing reading of the New Testament; believing biblical scholars who struggle with the question of whether or how faith can function legitimately in biblical scholarship; and those whose task it is to teach and preach the faith that looks to the New Testament, properly and integrally understood, as source and norm. In other words, my purpose is to elaborate a theory of New Testament interpretation that can ground a reading of the text that is unreservedly critical, on the one hand, and that interacts meaningfully with the personal and communal spiritual life of the believing reader, whether scholar or lay, on the other.

It is difficult to name such a project, because almost any descriptive term one can suggest is haunted by ghosts from the historical closet of biblical studies. No matter how carefully one defines the terms, these ghosts contaminate the imagination with pale shades of thinkers and theories from other times and dark rumblings of errors past and present. So it seems best, at least at this point, to be as prosaic as possible and denote the project simply as an essay in hermeneutical theory. I will have much to say about the meaning of the term *hermeneutics*, but, for the moment, let a simple definition suffice. Hermeneutics means "interpretation." It can refer either to the *practice* of interpretation or to the *theory* that comes to realization in the practice of interpretation. The concern of this book is primarily with the theory, that is, with the understanding rather than with the practice of interpretation, although, in chapter 7, I will attempt to put the theory into practice in a case study. In relationship to the actual work of interpreting the New Testament, that is, of attaining to the meaning of the text, this study is primarily a metaproject, a second-level reflection on the meaning of interpretation itself, its conditions of possibility, and the processes involved in carrying it out.

B. The Objectives of New Testament Interpretation

Everyone can agree that the objective of New Testament interpretation is to arrive at an understanding of the meaning of the text. But there the agreement ends, because the meaning of meaning itself as well as of understanding is disputable. In fact, there are two kinds of objectives pursued by readers of the New Testament, and meaning is somewhat different in each case. One can read the text primarily for *information* or in view of *transformation*, that is, to be intellectually enlightened or to be personally converted. The two objectives are intimately related, but they are not identical. One of the major preoccupations of this study is the question of how these two objectives are related and whether, in fact, they define two distinct and separable projects or are integral parts of a single interpretive undertaking.

First, there is the objective of information. It is clear enough that the New Testament text is an historical document in some sense of the word. It was written sometime in the past about events that either did or did not happen. It contains theological reflections, spiritual exhortations, and records of religious praxis. All of these phenomena can be interrogated. We can inquire about the production of the text itself (who wrote it, when, where, in what language) and about its transmission (whether the text is authentic, whether our copies are accurate). We can raise historical questions about how the text's account is related to the actual past events it purports to recount. We can struggle to understand the theological positions it presents and their relationships to one another and to the surrounding world of thought. We can try to establish what kind of spirituality and religious practice these texts represent. All of this inquiry is motivated by the desire for information of some kind.

Second, there is the objective of transformation. Here the objective is to go beyond simply discovering what the text says to asking if what it says is true, and if so in what sense, and what the personal consequences for the reader and others might be. Reading for transformation is a properly existential project as opposed to a properly historical one.[4] The existential pursuit in the religious sphere belongs to the field of spirituality. Its concern is to bring the reader, as much as possible, into the truth, not just to abstract knowledge in the factual sense of the word but to that existential involvement with the truth to which the Jesus of John's gospel invites his hearers when he urges them to indwell his word and let it abide in them in order that they might become his disciples, be made truly free, worship rightly, and bear much fruit (cf. John 8:31–32; 4:21–26; 15:1–11 and elsewhere).

While one can study the New Testament for information without concerning oneself directly with its transformative potentialities (indeed, one can sedulously abstain from engaging the latter, although it is questionable whether such a study, in the case of a text that was written for religious purposes, is academically defensible), the converse is certainly not true. It is only what the text actually says that can, in truth, transformatively engage the spiritually motivated reader. Consequently, while the person pursuing the first objective of biblical study (information) might be minimally interested in the existential aspect of biblical study (transformation), the person interested in the existential aspect of the text has no choice but to become seriously involved with its informational aspects.

C. The Meaning of Meaning

Both those who pursue information and those seeking transformation are concerned with the meaning of the text, but as has already been said, that word does not denote precisely the same thing in both cases. Although we will take up the issues of meaning, understanding, and interpretation in detail in chapter 6 and of methodology in chapters 4 to 6, an overview of the subject at this point will provide a philosophical framework for what follows. Meaning, according to the enlightening analysis of Paul Ricoeur following the lead of the mathematician Gottlob Frege, is first and foremost an *event* constituted by the dialectic between sense and reference.[5] First of all, meaning happens. Subsequently, it is possible by writing or some other form of fixation to capture the meaning in a permanent though ideal form so that it can be later reactualized, that is, it can give rise to a new event of meaning that will be not identical to but tensively related with the original event and with all other events arising from interaction with the fixed ideal form. Meaning in this ideal sense coincides with the *semantic content* of the text.

Sense refers to the propositional integrity of the sentence (or larger linguistic unit). A word as such, that is, as a simple lexical unit, does not really have sense. It has a certain denotative capacity, actually because of its relationship to other words in the same lexicon, but it does not "make sense" by itself. This is especially clear with words like *tie,* which can have a plurality of significations (a thing, an action, a competitive stalemate) and which cannot even denote unless specified in some way by context. Sense, properly speaking, is carried by the proposition. It is necessary and sufficient for the constitution of sense (as opposed to truth) that the words in the proposition be in the proper grammatical and syntactical relationship to each other. The sentence "An apple is a citrus fruit" makes sense. Any English speaker can understand it. The fact that it is not true does not impede understanding. In fact, it is precisely because we do understand it that we can say it is not true.

Reference is the proposition's claim to reach reality; it is the truth claim of the sentence (or larger unit). In the example above the sentence intends not simply to say something (to make sense) but to say something true about something (to refer). Sense and reference, in dialectical relationship, constitute the event of meaning. In this case we make a judgment that the meaning conveyed is false, but that does not deprive the sentence of meaning. We both know what it means and know that it is false.

For the New Testament reader seeking primarily information, the meaning being pursued is that constituted by the dialectic between the sense of the text (what it says) and its reference (what it is ostensibly about, which may be history, theology, or some other content). If we ask, for example, about the meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), we must determine, first, the sense of the text, that is, what it actually says in the language in which it was written. Second, we must inquire about its reference. It would be incorrect, in this case, to view the referent as an actual, historical episode involving a traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho. The story is a parable, that is, a fictional story aimed at the existential situation of the hearer. The real referent is Jesus' teaching on the second great commandment of the Law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The primary meaning of the text, constituted by the dialectical relationship between what it says (the sense) and what it is about (the reference), consists in what the text presents as Jesus' interpretation of the great commandment.

Obviously, this raises many problems such as whether the text accurately represents Jesus' parable, whether Jesus ever told such a parable, whether there was an historical Jesus and whether that really matters, whether the claims his disciples made for Jesus were true and, if so, what effect that has on the significance of his teaching, and so on. Dealing with such questions plays an important role in interpretation and will be taken up in due course. For the moment our concern is with the meaning of meaning in the context of informational interpretation.

There are, of course, many other kinds of information integral to the meaning of this text that can and must also be the object of a thoroughgoing exegetical inquiry: the critique of the institutional religious leaders, a transcendence of ethnic and religious exclusivity, Jesus' relationship to his questioners, and the like. All of this and much more is the object of the informational interrogation of the text, of exegesis in the proper historical critical sense of the word, which aims to arrive at the meaning of the text in its own historical-cultural-religious terms regardless of its implications for the reader.

The primary concern of the scripture reader whose objective is transformation lies through and beyond this informational interpretation. A second dialectic is inaugurated in which the meaning arrived at by informational interpretation becomes the sense (what is said) but the referent (what it is about) is the world of the reader or the reader-in-the-world. Meaning now means existential significance, not truth in the abstract that one remains free to engage or ignore, but truth in the concrete that by the very fact of being grasped seizes its subject.

The existential meaning of the text is dialectically engaged with the world of the reader. We have already adverted to the enormous complexity of the former, which contains within itself myriad historical and theological questions. The latter, the world of the reader, is at least as complex. As Heidegger has taught us, world is not a spatial container, or even an environment.[6] It is an ever-changing, moving equilibrium of relationships of which we are the locus and in which, consequently, we participate. No two people inhabit exactly the same world, although our worlds overlap. The interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader is a dialectic between two complex and never totally objectifiable networks of meaning, and the dialectic affects both. As we will see later, neither the meaning of the text nor the reader in his or her world emerges from this encounter unchanged.

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer described the effect of meaning (in the sense of an event) as the experience of a "fusion of horizons." The world of the text (its referent as significant) and the world of the reader intersect, expanding or contracting the horizons of the latter in the event of meaning.[7] To engage the meaning of the text at this level is to court conversion. Once one has seen and heard, one is no longer the same. Even to resist change is to be affected.

Obviously, both kinds of inquiry, that which seeks primarily meaning as information and that which seeks primarily meaning as transformative significance, involve interpretation, that is, the dialectical process of *explanation* and *understanding*. As we will see in some detail in chapters 4 and 5, explanation is the analytical and synthetic work by which we distance the text, that is, establish it in its otherness, so that it does not say what we project into it but says to us what it has to say. Understanding is the event in which the text's meaning comes home, that is, in which we overcome the distance by appropriating the meaning, incorporating it into our own world. It is possible to restrict that incorporation to the cognitive sphere, making the informational meaning part of our intellectual world (which is thereby transformed) without engaging the existential truth claims of the text. It is also possible to incorporate the existential meaning into our life as a whole, allowing it to modify our world and thus transform us. A major part of this study concerns the relationship between these two levels of appropriation in the work of New Testament interpretation.

D. Hermeneutics as Inquiry into Interpretation

The road to meaning is interpretation, which, as we have seen, is a dialectic between explanation and understanding. Because we use these two terms, *understanding* and *interpretation*, in ordinary discourse with such a variety of meanings, it is necessary at this point to give a preliminary sketch of the range of meaning of each of them and to specify the uses I will make of them in what follows. They will be taken up in detail in chapter 6.

Understanding is what we finally seek in and through all cognitive effort. But, as Gadamer following Heidegger has made us aware, the term *understanding* has two meanings. First, and most fundamentally, understanding is our characteristically human way of being, our fundamental mode of being-in-the-world.[8] To be, humanly, is to understand. In this sense, understanding cannot be restricted to the purely cognitive realm. It is not exclusively an intellectual activity. We know this from common experience, which makes us aware that when we speak of people as being "understanding" we are not usually denoting their rational capacities and operations alone but their relationships of empathy and care with all that is involved in a situation. Understanding is the way being, all being potentially, comes to be in us eliciting the appropriate response, which is simultaneously cognitive and affective and operational.[9] Understanding is our existential participation in the world, our very existence as focus of that network of relations that, though never fully objectifiable, both constitutes and contextualizes us as human. In this sense understanding is coterminous with human being. At every moment of consciousness we "are understanding," that is, we are dynamically interrelated with being in various ways and through particular beings.

Understanding in this sense is the object of *ontological* inquiry. Ontology is concerned with being itself, what it means to be. For humans as humans, to be is to be-in-the-world participatively, which is what we call understanding.

A second meaning of understanding, the one we tend to think of when asked to define the word, refers to the cognitive operation by which we come to know. Thus we speak of coming to understand a mathematical proposition or a political position. Understanding in this sense is the object of *epistemological* inquiry. Epistemology is concerned with what we can know (the object, range, and limitations of human knowledge), how we come to know (the processes such as sensation and reasoning by which we arrive at knowledge), and the criteria of true knowledge.

Interpretation is coextensive with understanding in this second sense. Every act of knowledge is achieved through interpretation. Sometimes, indeed most of the time, interpretation takes place so swiftly that we do not notice it. As I look before me I see a table with an apple on it. I do not, as the British empiricists of the nineteenth century thought, receive a variety of discrete sense impressions, such as color and smell, that must be somehow combined to produce the experience of entities such as "table" or "apple." In fact, we usually perceive something *as* something, and that *perception as* is what we mean by interpretation. By experience, habit, and training we come to experience the realities of everyday life, and even the material of our many areas of competence, as what and how we know them to be with such speed and accuracy that we do not notice the interpretational moment in the process of understanding. Our subjective experience is simply one of understanding what we encounter.

It is only when understanding breaks down or misfires that we attend to interpretation. When we confront something we do not recognize or understand, or when we realize after the fact that we have been mistaken or that what we thought we understood cannot be brought into a satisfactory relationship with other things that we know, we return to the mental drawing board to inquire into the matter. This inquiry is an effort at interpretation, an attempt to "make sense" of the phenomenon and thereby arrive at its meaning, that is, understand it. When understanding as cognitional operation is achieved, that which is understood is appropriated. It becomes part of our way of being in the world. We do not simply understand more; we are more understanding. That dynamic repose, which is our participation in reality as a kind of moving equilibrium, is understanding in the full, ontological sense of the term. It is being constantly modified, for good or for ill, by our ongoing interpretation of reality, that is, by our coming to understanding in the epistemological sense of the term.

If interpretation is the road to meaning and meaning is what is understood and therefore what expands our human being, it is not at all surprising that interpretation itself has become a primary object of inquiry. Everything we know is known through interpretation.[10] But as long as nothing challenges our interpretation we take its correct and fruitful operation for granted. At various times in history, the collective, taken for granted, interpretations of very significant portions of reality have been challenged. One such time was the sixteenth century, when the common-sense understanding of nature, on the one hand, and Christian religious truth, on the other, were challenged by the scientific revolution and the Protestant Reformation respectively.

Since the sixteenth century an intellectual ferment has been at work that seems to be coming to a head in our own times with the development of an interest in hermeneutics that crosses all disciplinary boundaries. Hermeneutics means both the (or a) theory of interpretation and the field of inquiry that has interpretation itself as its object, the field that is concerned with developing an adequate theory of interpretation. Literary critics, natural scientists, theologians, psychologists, social scientists, historians, physicians, artists, and biblical scholars today are concerned with hermeneutics, both as a generalized theory of interpretation and as particular theories of interpretation applicable to various spheres of inquiry.

One of the primary reasons for the growing cross-disciplinary interest in this field is the breakdown of an approach to knowledge that was developed in the aftermath of the scientific revolution, that came to be accepted as universally and uniquely valid, and that has, in recent years, revealed itself as inadequate. This approach, which was called the scientific method and was considered the only effective way to achieve true knowledge, has been dethroned even among scientists, and its demise as the unique path to reliable knowledge has raised anew the question of interpretation. More needs to be said (and will be in chapter 4) about the scientific method, its potentialities and limitations, but for the moment it suffices to note that the malaise created by its inadequacies is the context of the contemporary discussion about interpretation.

To inquire into interpretation is a three-pronged undertaking. First, it involves ontological reflection (although this is not where the majority of hermeneutical theorists begin), or reflection on the nature of understanding in general as the human mode of being and on understanding in the particular field under discussion, for example, physics or sacred scripture. The philosopher Martin Heidegger reopened this field of inquiry in the early part of this century, and his influence on the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann introduced the question into biblical studies where it has slowly gathered momentum as new methods of investigation have begun to challenge the monopoly of historical criticism, the "scientific method" in the biblical field. Gadamer has built on Heidegger's foundations an imposing hermeneutical philosophy that has become integral to the most impressive recent hermeneutical investigations in theology and biblical studies.[11]

Second, the inquiry into interpretation involves epistemological reflection. This is the theoretical level at which most of the scholarly discussion is taking place. Epistemology, as already noted, is concerned with the theory of knowledge, what we can know, how we can know it, and the criteria of valid knowledge. Contemporary work in this field is distinguished by its acceptance of a realization achieved at the ontological level, namely, the pervasively linguistic character of human knowing. Human being is as much characterized by language as it is by understanding because all understanding is somehow linguistic.[12] The "somehow" is very important, because obviously there is more to knowledge than spoken or written words. But it is characteristic of contemporary hermeneutical inquiry that it is concerned with the mediated quality of human understanding. This has led to extensive work on language in general and on symbol, metaphor, myth, and all those forms of polyvalent mediation that both extend understanding and communicate meaning. The most important figure in this discussion is the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose work has influenced almost every sphere of contemporary hermeneutical thought, largely because of his own capacity to understand and to incorporate into his reflection the contributions and insights of fields as diverse as anthropology, semiotics, theology, biblical studies, and literary criticism.[13]

Of great importance in the epistemological discussion is the contribution of the so-called masters of suspicion, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, and their successors, the ideology critics such as Jürgen Habermas and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. These theorists are concerned with the distorting effects of ideology on the process and product of interpretation, which we will take up in more detail in chapters 6 and 7. They have taught us not only that there is no such thing as presuppositionless understanding but also that our presuppositions are rarely neutral or even innocent. Conscious and unconscious power interests and agendas significantly influence, indeed, often control, interpretation. The social position of the interpreter is not something from which one can abstract, thereby achieving an objective interpretation. Consequently, a hermeneutics of suspicion that unmasks ideological distortion is an indispensable component of every effort to understand the world's great texts, most of which have been written by the "historical winners."

Third, inquiry into interpretation must finally address the question of methodology. Methodology is metareflection, a study of the methods that are used to achieve understanding in a particular sphere and of their interrelations. A major breakthrough in the intellectual life of the twentieth century has been the realization that the Cartesian ideal of a single method, modeled on mathematics and adapted in various ways, that would allow access to reliable knowledge based on clear and distinct ideas in all spheres was wrongheaded from the start. The amazing progress in the physical sciences that resulted from the development of what came to be called the scientific method so intoxicated the Western mind with the possibility of unlimited if not universal knowledge that the attempt was made to extend the method to every field of inquiry. The collapse of this epistemological ideal and the project it generated has necessitated the reopening of the question of method.

The theoretical discussion of method is more advanced in many fields than it is in biblical studies. The biblical academy is still quite firmly wedded to the historical critical methods developed by the nineteenth-century higher critics, modified by later insights but essentially identical in goal and procedures. However, a chorus of discordant voices from the periphery of the field has become increasingly difficult to silence or discredit. New methods such as structuralist, sociological, psychological, ideological and liberationist (especially feminist, African-American, and Third World), and literary (especially narrative and audience-oriented) criticism are being utilized with increasingly interesting and impressive results. Furthermore, the spiritual ferment of our times has led those interested in spirituality, that is, in Christian religious experience, to raise serious questions about the validity of interpretation that is often enough, if not unassimilable, at least useless for the Christian religious quest. The challenge to the adequacy of a single, uniform methodology in the field of biblical studies has opened the path for the entrance of hermeneutical reflection into the inner forum of the field.

This study, subtitled "Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture," is born of a conclusion resulting from the foregoing analysis of the situation in contemporary biblical scholarship. Against a background of profound respect, indeed, admiration, for the prodigious accomplishments of modern historical critical biblical scholarship, this conclusion is nevertheless critical, even harsh: contemporary New Testament scholarship actually lacks a developed hermeneutical theory. To that extent, it does not really "know what it is doing" in the theoretical sense of that expression. It knows *how* to do what it is doing, but has uncritically taken for granted that *what* it is doing is exactly and only what needs to be done in order for this text, which is probably still the most influential text in the Western world, to be truly understood. It is this unexamined presupposition, hidden underneath an impressive array of exegetical methods and an even more impressive array of exegetical results, that I want to bring out into the light for investigation.

A principle that was canonized in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment has been central to all subsequent intellectual endeavor, namely, that free critical investigation, not the exercise of authority, is the ultimate criterion of true human knowledge. Although many agencies, personal and institutional, continue to contest this principle, it is so integral to the modern intellectual Weltanschauung that serious scholarship does not waste its time debating with proponents of other criteria. When the Protestant Reformers rejected the authority of the Roman church as final interpreter of the Bible, they predisposed the field of biblical study for the application of this principle to its later academic enterprise. Whatever Luther may have thought about the role of faith in the believer's understanding of the "plain sense" of the biblical text, the effect of his emancipation of interpretation from dogmatic tutelage was to assign to the reader the ultimate responsibility for interpreting the text rightly. It was only a short logical step, although it took two centuries to mature, to the conclusion that the reader must judge his or her conclusions against the Enlightenment standard of sound criticism, the sole guarantee of genuine knowledge. When this conclusion was incorporated into biblical scholarship, it gave rise to what came to be called the higher criticism, that is, the application to the biblical text of the same methods applied in the interpretation of other historical texts.

The methods that were applied, and that came collectively to be called historical criticism, included all the known avenues to historical knowledge: ancient languages, philology, archaeology, history of religions, comparative literature, historical studies, and so on. What these methods had in common was their goal of uncovering historical data. The concerns of the scholars were, originally, to discover through the biblical text what "really happened" and, somewhat later, to discover what the biblical authors intended to say (whether or not that was in accord with what really happened or with what the Church today believes). Both sets of questions were properly historical. Underneath this procedure was a presupposition, never seriously questioned by critical biblical scholars, that the Bible insofar as it could be the object of human scholarly inquiry was essentially (and for all practical purposes exclusively) an historical document.

There were, of course, those who did not accept either this presupposition or its implications for biblical study. Among Protestants the objections most often took the form of an insistence that the Bible is the Word of God and therefore not a proper subject of human scientific investigation. Human beings were subject to the Word, not vice versa. Among Catholics the protest was that the Bible was the Church's book, its resource for theology and faith, and that its authoritative interpretation was the exclusive preserve of those charged by Christ with the care of the community's faith and morals, namely, the hierarchical magisterium, which was not subject to the vicissitudes of scholarly discussion.

Since neither of these positions engaged the fundamental intellectual issue, namely, the criterion of true knowledge, the academy did not interest itself in them. While the Catholic position made critical biblical scholarship virtually impossible for a believing Catholic (thus delaying the entrance of Catholic exegetes into the field of biblical studies until the 1940s)[14] the Protestant position inaugurated an animated debate that led to the development, eventually, of the only serious attempts in modern times to formulate a biblical hermeneutics, namely, the theoretical efforts of Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth and their intellectual descendants, the New Questers and the New Hermeneuts.[15]

Lively as the New Hermeneutics discussion among Protestants was during the 1960s and 1970s, it was essentially a discussion among continental theologians that never really became central to the agenda of the biblical academy even in Europe, much less in America, which was rapidly becoming the primary locus of biblical scholarship. And it never really engaged the energies of Catholic scholars, who were shrewd enough to know that raising theoretical questions about the nature of the Bible and biblical understanding could easily lead to a retrenchment by church authorities who had so recently and tentatively accepted the validity and necessity of historical criticism.

In short, mainstream biblical scholarship has been guided by its espousal of and fascination with a method, namely, historical criticism, rather than by a developed hermeneutical theory. It has not raised the ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions whose answers are integral to any such theory. The field of historical investigation of the Bible is virtually endless, and its results entrancingly tantalizing. Thus, the hermeneutical question would probably never have surfaced if it were not for developments outside the sphere of historical critical scholarship itself.

This is not the place to detail these developments,[16] but basically they were, on the one hand, an increasing concern on the part of believers in general with the role of scripture in their spiritual lives and, on the other hand, the increasing interaction between biblical studies and secular university disciplines such as literary studies, sociology, psychology, women's studies, and various areas of philosophy.

The results of historical criticism had proved to be of real, but quite limited, value for the spiritual project of most Christians.[17] Religiously sensitive biblical scholars themselves began to search for new approaches to the text. The quest for a spiritually fruitful understanding of scripture led to efforts, at first almost clandestine and certainly tentative but then increasingly open and confident, to apply other nonhistorical methods to the biblical texts.[18] These efforts both encouraged and were encouraged by the increasing academic contact between biblical scholars (no longer restricted to seminary settings) and scholars in nontheological fields (increasingly interested in the meaningfulness of classical texts, religious and otherwise). Following the original logic, which led from the realization that historical methods were fruitful to the conclusion that the Bible was an historical document, scholars began to conclude that if other methods were also fruitful perhaps there were other dimensions to the Bible's reality. Ironically, however, the methodological fascination that impeded the emergence of the hermeneutical question in the *grande époque* of historical criticism is also impeding its emergence in the more methodologically pluralistic situation today.

The point of H.-G. Gadamer's masterwork, *Truth and Method*, is that when method controls thought and investigation the latter may lead to accurate data but it does not lead to truth. Method, understood as a preestablished set of procedures for investigating some phenomenon, in fact not only *attains* its object but *creates* its object. In other words, it determines a priori what kind of data can be obtained and will be considered relevant. If, for example, my method of investigation is a ruler, the only scientifically reliable datum that can emerge is linear dimension. If no other methods are employed, over a long period of time I might eventually conclude that the only significant datum about reality is linear dimension and that the essential scientific definition of reality is in terms of physical extension. Method not only assures a systematic coverage of certain areas of investigation; it also rules out of court any data not discoverable by that method.

Historical methods have controlled scientific biblical studies for centuries. Consequently, data uncovered by other methods, be they religious contemplation or preaching, the application of psychological or sociological models, or the use of literary critical theory or feminist analysis, were immediately rejected by "serious scholars" as lacking scientific rigor and appropriate objectivity, as irrelevant to biblical research, or as being simply outside the sphere of scholarship altogether (a charge often leveled, until quite recently, against liberationist interpretation, which was regarded as "special pleading").

Despite the biblical establishment's determined resistance to new methods, the multiplication of methods being used by younger biblical scholars combined with the insistence of believing communities that faith's approach to the text both has something of cognitive importance to offer and has a right to be enhanced by scholarship worthy of the name has led to the present situation in which the need for a full-fledged hermeneutical theory has become imperative. The historical critical "center" is not holding. The new voices, until recently peripheral, are establishing themselves inside the camp. Increasingly the question of the coherence of the project of biblical interpretation, given the plurality of methods and the validity of multiple interpretations, is emerging as urgent.

Method cannot be the starting point for this project. Once committed to a method, one cannot logically raise the ontological and epistemological questions whose answers are integral to hermeneutical theory. On the other hand, to start with ontological and/or epistemological questions in the abstract is to risk remaining in the abstract, because such questions cannot really intend specific subject matter such as the New Testament. They are, by their nature, general inquiries into the *being* of understanding (no matter what is being understood) and the *nature and limits of knowledge* (no matter what is to be known). Where, then, to start?

I propose to begin the reexamination of the question of New Testament hermeneutics at the other end of the concrete project of biblical studies, that is, not with method (the operations of the investigator) but with the object (that which is to be studied). I propose to take seriously not just the concerns of scholarship but also those of believers; not just the voices of those within the traditional mainstream of biblical scholarship but also those new voices that are clamoring for a hearing by their production of new and interesting knowledge; not just the interests of those who have had central roles in the communities that appeal to the Bible as foundational and therefore have no trouble accepting the text as normative and even revelatory but also those who have been marginalized in those communities and who know that the Bible has contributed to that marginalization. In other words, I want to reexamine the question of what kind of reality the Bible is in hopes that in the answer to that question will be carried the answers, or at least the beginnings of answers, to the questions of what can count for understanding of this reality, what kind of knowledge of it is possible and desirable, and how we can pursue that knowledge with methodological integrity.

Part 1 of the study will be devoted to a serious engagement of the theological and ecclesial claims made for the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular, since these claims, finally, are the basic reason why the Bible, in itself not particularly significant as a literary or historical document, has been the object of unremitting study by Christians for more than two thousand years. This is a frankly theological inquiry. There is no purely secular scientific access to the New Testament's reality as word of God nor to its situation in the tradition of the Church. However, it is precisely as word of God, that is, as a theological reality, that this text is regarded as sacred scripture, as "revelatory text." I hope to be able to show that there is an intellectually reputable access to this theological dimension of the New Testament's reality, an access that does not rely on unsubstantiated dogmatic assertions but on publicly discussable positions, and that the conclusions from such an examination can be integrated into a theory of biblical interpretation without prejudice to the integrity and public credibility of biblical scholarship.

Part 2 of the study will attempt to take seriously the human reality of the New Testament, that is, its historical (chapter 4), literary and linguistic (chapter 5), and religious/spiritual (chapter 6) character. But rather than consider these dimensions in isolation from the theological considerations (chapters 2 and 3) that establish the nature and identity of the New Testament as sacred scripture, I will examine each of them in interrelation with the others and as dimensions of the character of the New Testament as revelatory text. Finally, in chapter 7, I will apply the hermeneutical theory developed throughout the book to a particular passage, the Samaritan Woman episode in John 4, in an attempt to do an integral, transformative interpretation of the passage.

In the course of this examination much will be said about methodology and even about particular methods, but it will not be methodology as either starting point or final goal that will control the project. The aim is to understand what it means to understand the New Testament, what it means to achieve meaning through interpretation of this text, how this text can function as "pure and lasting fount of spiritual life"[19] for contemporary readers, both professional and lay, who must approach it as post-Enlightenment (and even postmodern) believers.

Notes

1. As explained at greater length in the Introduction, I use *Old Testament* for the first testament of the Christian Bible and *Jewish scriptures* for the scriptures of the community of Israel.
2. I dealt more extensively with the problems raised by this division of labor in "Freedom: Response and Responsibility: The Vocation of the Biblical Scholar in the Church," in *Whither Creativity,*

Freedom, Suffering? Humanity, Cosmos, God, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1981), 25-52.

3. For a brief history and explanation of fundamentalism as well as a basic bibliography on the subject, see Mark Corner, "Fundamentalism," *DBI:* 243-247.
4. Throughout this study I will use *existential* as a secular synonym for "spiritual" as the latter figures in spirituality. I reserve *spiritual* and *spirituality* for reference to the religiously existential.
5. *IT*, pp. 8-12.
6. See *TM*, pp. 438-456, for a summary and development of the philosophical-linguistic concept of "world" in contrast to environment.
7. I will suggest in chapter 6 that the horizon of the textual world is also affected by the fusion of horizons.
8. *TM*, pp. 254-264.
9. See Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, "Personal Knowledge," in *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 22-45.
10. Whenever I speak globally of knowing or knowledge I intend to allow for a possible exception in regard to mystical knowledge; because of the nondualistic character of its actual occurrence, it cannot be simply assimilated to theories of ordinary intuitive or discursive knowledge.
11. Of particular importance is the work of David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) and *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), and that of Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (New York: Crossroad, 1988). For a concise treatment of the subject see David Tracy, "Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm," in *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, ed. Hans Küng and David Tracy, trans. Margaret Köhl (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 34-62.
12. Gadamer devotes the entire part 3 of *TM* to the exploration of this point.
13. Of particular interest for this study are the following collections of essays: *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974); *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and intro. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed., trans., and intro. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), contains a section, "Language and Hermeneutics," pp. 95-166, that includes several of Ricoeur's seminal articles on interpretation.
14. For a concise history of the relationship of the Vatican to Catholic biblical scholarship, see Raymond E. Brown and Thomas Aquinas Collins, "Church Pronouncements," *NJBC* 72: esp. 18-41.
15. See John Reumann, "Jesus and Christology," *NTMI:* 501-564, on the New Quest of the historical Jesus; this article includes a nearly exhaustive bibliography. For an introduction to the New Hermeneutics, see James M. Robinson, "Hermeneutics Since Barth," *The New Hermeneutic*, vol. 2 of *New Frontiers in Theology: Discussions Among Continental and American Theologians*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 1-77.
16. I discussed them in more detail in the article "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," *Horizons* 8 (Spring 1981): 23-39.
17. Although this was true of much that emanated from the academy, it was balanced to some extent by the herculean efforts of some pastorally sensitive biblical scholars such as Paul Achtemeier, Raymond Brown, Walter Brueggemann, R. A. F. MacKenzie, Roland Murphy, Carolyn Osiek, Pheme Perkins, Carroll Stuhlmueller, Bruce Vawter, and many others, to make the results of historical critical exegesis available to and assimilable by clergy and laity.
18. Perhaps the most famous American challenge to the guild was Walter Wink's *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).
19. *DV* VI:21.

2

The New Testament as Word of God

The most universal faith affirmation about the Bible is that it is the "word of God." This affirmation grounds the central importance attributed to this book by the Christian community and the endless efforts of religiously committed scholars and preachers to interpret it and to proclaim its contents. Around the expression "word of God" clusters a collection of interrelated theological terms such as revelation, inspiration, authority, infallibility, inerrancy, and normativity that are understood in radically different ways by believers in various traditions. The task of this chapter is to explore the meaning of the expression "word of God" as applied to the Christian sacred scriptures in general and the New Testament in particular and to use the meaning thereby established to clarify the related theological terms in the hope that this clarification will ground and justify the approach to New Testament hermeneutical theory that this study proposes.

A. The Linguistic Expression "Word of God": A Metaphor

"Word of God" is first of all a linguistic expression. Before taking up the question of what the expression refers to it is necessary to reflect on its character as language, that is, on the kind of linguistic reality it is. The expression "word of God" does not, of course, refer to a single word uttered by God but to intelligible divine speech, to language or discourse attributed to God. Our question, then, is about what kind of linguistic reality an expression like "God's discourse" or "God's speaking" really is.

Despite the widespread insistence to the contrary that biblical fundamentalism represents, it seems evident that word of God or divine discourse cannot be taken literally. First, words (whether taken singly or functioning in discourse) are the intelligible physical sounds emitted by the vocal apparatus (or some substitute for that apparatus) of a rational creature or, by extension, some auditory or visual representation of those utterances. Language, in other words, is a human phenomenon rooted in our corporeality as well as in our discursive mode of intellection and as such cannot be literally predicated of pure spirit. Just as we cannot say that an expression such as "God sees our thoughts" is a literal statement, because God does not have eyes and thoughts are not the kind of entities that reflect physical light and can therefore be seen, so we cannot say that God literally speaks.

But there is a second reason, perhaps less obvious but even more important, why we cannot literally attribute language to God, namely, the noncommensurability of the essentially limited reality of language with the infinite God. Anyone who has struggled to put into words profound feeling or complex thought has personally experienced the finite character of language. It is not simply that we are limited in our capacity to use language; language itself is limited.

One indication of the limitation of language is the **polyvalent character of words.** Words, in order to have real meaning as opposed to a certain ambiguous indicative potentiality, have to be placed in context in order to be specified sufficiently to communicate at all. And even in context they often remain somewhat ambiguous.

Another indication of the limitation characteristic of language is the fact that **no language is fully translatable.** All translation involves making choices that specify the meaning of the original text in ways that never exactly correspond to or fully capture the meaning of the original. There is no perfect correspondence between any two languages because each is limited by its own cultural, historical, and other socially determined peculiarities.

A third indication that language is limited is the fact that **words change in meaning** over time. This happens not merely because speakers are capricious or unskilled in the use of language but because human experience, which comes to expression in language, changes. Part of the extraordinary power of language as a, if not the, distinctively human characteristic is the virtually infinite flexibility of its very limited material resources, the capacity of the same limited vocabulary and grammar to bring to expression the incredible range and quality of human experience.[1] But despite this marvelous flexibility it remains frustratingly true that the most important things we have to communicate can never find fully adequate expression in language; thus we repeat and expand and explain and reexpress in the never-ending effort to finally say what we really mean.

For both of the above reasons, namely the corporeal rootedness and the essential limitation of language, we have to say that our attribution of language to God cannot be understood literally. God is infinite, and God is spirit. Language is a finite corporeal-discursive operation. It is the most characteristic and elevated achievement of our humanity as intelligent life, so it is fitting that we use our most amazing capacity and attainment in our understanding of God. But we play that process false when we understand the attribution literally and, rather than recognizing our likeness to God, circumscribe God by human limitations.

For many people, the only alternative to understanding the expression "word of God" literally is to understand it as pure fancy, as radically untrue and therefore ultimately meaningless. They think that if God does not literally speak then we have no meaningful cognitive contact with God. Such is emphatically not the case. The expression "word of God" is a metaphor, and metaphor is perhaps our most powerful use of language, our most effective access to the meaning of reality at its deepest levels.

Metaphor's bad reputation among people with a thirst for reality comes from centuries of understanding metaphor according to a purely rhetorical model. Contemporary linguistic and literary theorists, realizing that this understanding of metaphor as a mere rhetorical device does not and cannot account for the tremendous power of metaphorical discourse, have developed a semantic model of metaphor that allows us to grasp the inner dynamics of this marvelous linguistic phenomenon.[2]

Let us begin by saying what metaphor is not. First, true metaphor is not merely a contracted simile, that is, a comparison in which the connectives *like* or *as* have been suppressed for rhetorical effect. Second, metaphor is not simply a literary ornament, a decoration of speech that makes it more aesthetically pleasing, more interesting, or more convincing. Third, metaphor is not merely an illustration by which we make something that is difficult to understand because of its abstract quality a little more accessible by means of a concrete example. And finally, metaphor is not a substitute for a literal expression that can be restored to the discourse once the metaphor's meaning is understood thereby suppressing the need for the metaphor. This latter point means that genuine metaphor is not translatable into literal meaning. All of these denials belong to the basic contention that genuine metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device. Metaphor, as we shall see, is an instrument of new meaning, a way of achieving genuine semantic innovation.

One more negative statement about metaphor, on a completely different level, is very important. For reasons to be discussed shortly, real metaphors are very unstable linguistic entities. They exist in and even as linguistic tension involving a simultaneous affirmation and negation of the likeness between the two terms of the metaphor. The metaphor contains an "is" and an "is not," held in irresolvable tension. But tension, like ambiguity, always has a tendency to resolution, to suppression of the tension. Metaphors, which are tensive language, tend to either banalization or literalization.

A true metaphor is *banalized* when it has been repeated often enough that it loses its capacity to surprise, to tease the imagination into the engagement of new possibilities. Most live metaphors eventually die. Some simply become part of the lexical polysemy of the word. For example, referring to that strangely elusive silver-white metallic element that is liquid at ordinary temperatures as "mercury" was originally metaphoric. Now the second dictionary meaning of mercury, following its primary meaning as the name of the swift Roman messenger god, is the metallic element. In fact, most people probably think of the metal before they think of either the god Mercury or the planet named after him.

Other metaphors never become part of the dictionary meaning; they simply become trite. To speak of looking into the depths of someone's eyes is to use a trite metaphor. Everyone knows, of course, that physical human eyes are not literally deep. The metaphor is not a literal description but an evocation of the psychological experience of intimacy that meeting and holding another's gaze can occasion. But we have become so familiar with the application of the metaphor of depth in this case that it no longer gives rise to that tension between meanings that constitutes the power of live metaphor.

A much more dangerous way of resolving the tension of true metaphor is to *literalize* it. To literalize the metaphor is to suppress its negative pole, that about it that "is not," and to affirm only the positive pole, that about it that "is." But when we do this, the literalized metaphor goes underground and works on the subconscious level creating vast reservoirs of cognitive untruth and distorted affectivity.

For example, the expression "God is our Father" is a powerful metaphor. To be a father, literally, is to cooperate in the generation of a human offspring by sexual intercourse with a woman. (Insects and/or animals are regarded as "parents" by extension of the human relationship to sexual reproduction on other levels.) Obviously, God is not a male being, does not engage in sexual intercourse, and does not produce human offspring. We recognize this by saying that God is our adoptive father rather than our biological father. (This, however, is just as metaphorical as calling God our "father.") But even though we know that God is not literally our male parent, either biologically or by legal process, the metaphor of divine fatherhood has been so literalized by many people that they are profoundly shocked by the use of feminine parental metaphors for God.[3] This is not the place to detail the cognitive confusion and affective distortion to which such literalization gives rise, but anyone who has dealt with these effects in the spiritual life of believers knows that a literalized metaphor is by no means simply dead. Literalized metaphor is the cancer of the religious imagination, powerfully and pathologically at work.

So far I have said what metaphor is not. It is necessary now to try to say what metaphor *is*. Understood according to a semantic rather than a rhetorical model, metaphor appears as a phenomenon not of denomination (a transfer of the meaning of one word to another word) but as a phenomenon of predication (an expansion of meaning itself). Classical rhetorical theory located the metaphorical phenomenon at the level of words. By applying to one word something that belonged properly to another word, one embellished discourse and thus made it more pleasing and/or persuasive. As Ricoeur, following contemporary literary theorists, points out, the true metaphorical process takes place not at the level of words but only at the level of the sentence.[4] A metaphor is a proposition that, if taken literally, is absurd. At the literal level it is meaning-less. The proposition seems to "make sense" in that it is a grammatically integral sentence, but the mind stumbles before the proposed reference. It is not simply a false statement like "Cats are canines." It is unable to deliver meaning, false or true. By the very fact that it obviously intends meaning (because its propositional structure is intact) but is literally absurd, it forces the mind into action to find meaning at another level. But the new meaning is not just another literal meaning in place of the first (which was absent). It is a different kind of meaning, an opening on a realm of significance that cannot be expressed literally but engages the imagination in a cognitive and affective exploration of the subject in and through relationships that seem strange but, in fact, are more illuminating than literal predication.

The dynamics of metaphor are constituted by the tension established between the two interpretations: the literal, which is absurd, and the metaphorical, which struggles to emerge into clarity at another level. A few paragraphs back I said that the literalized metaphor is a cancer of the imagination. Literally speaking, cancer is a physical pathology. To predicate it of the imagination is absurd at the literal level. But the sentence is not devoid of meaning that immediately begins to work, to struggle toward clarity. The metaphor carries hints of silent evil, of deadly life-gone-wild. It evokes fear and revulsion. It breathes bleak hopelessness, foreboding agony and death. I could have described more literally a literalized metaphor. Indeed, a little earlier, I did so. But the quasi-literal description in terms of the suppression of linguistic tension did not really convey the difference between a metaphor that is simply dead (that is, one that is just no longer effective) and a literalized metaphor (that is, one that no longer functions metaphorically but continues to function in powerfully distorting ways).[5] The metaphorical description opened the meaning in a way literal description not only *did* not do, but *could* not do. We resort to metaphor not to be linguistically clever but in the effort to bring to expression that which cannot be brought to expression in literal speech.

As was mentioned above, metaphors, because their power derives from the tension between the two interpretations, are unstable. The metaphor lives in the struggle between the "is" of the predication and the "is not" that the recognition of literal absurdity insinuates immediately into our perception. If either the "is" or the "is not" is suppressed, the metaphor is undone. If one suppresses the "is," one debilitates the metaphor, rendering it ineffectual. If one suppresses the "is not," one literalizes it. In the first case, the metaphor is seen as an exercise of sheer fancy, a mere illustration of some sort; in the second, it begins its deadly work in the imagination, distorting both cognition and affectivity. The metaphor only stays alive and healthy, enriching the imagination with meaning by its simultaneous engagement of cognitive and affective energy, if the tension can be maintained between the "is" and the "is not." This usually happens because, on the one hand, the mind can find no literal way to express something that demands expression and, on the other hand, the metaphor is so resistant to translation that neither the "is" nor the "is not" can be suppressed without causing a cognitive and affective discomfort that is less tolerable than the tension of the metaphor.

Most metaphors are eventually banalized; that is, they die. Some become trite and dull through repetition. Some become part of the polysemy of the language's words. But some metaphors do not die. They have a kind of perennial power to evoke response. They seem to be an inexhaustible source of semantic innovation, an endless reservoir of significance. They generate new metaphors that cluster around and enrich them and draw vitality from them. Theorists have coined the term *root metaphor*[6] for these extraordinarily enduring and powerful tensive images. A root metaphor is one that, like the root system of a tree in relation to the nutrients in the soil, draws together in a living synthesis numerous diverse cognitive and affective elements and nourishes ever new growth in meaning. The expression "reign of God," as Sallie McFague has so well explained, is such a root metaphor.[7] She is probably right in saying that it is *the* root metaphor of the Christian experience, that is, the central and coordinating metaphor for the immensely rich and complex reality of our personal and communal relationship with God in its past, present, and future dimensions.

The expression we are considering, "Sacred scripture is the word of God," is also a root metaphor. As we will see, it is the central and organizing image for the richly complex reality of divine revelation that we must consider in detail below. This amounts to saying that to claim, as we just have, that the expression "word of God" is not literal but metaphorical by no means robs the term of semantic density. It means, rather, that the reference of the term is not to literal divine speech but to the immensely more significant reality of divine revelation, which is certainly not restricted to the confines of human language.

Before moving on to a consideration of the real referent of the metaphor "word of God," namely, revelation, it is necessary to say a word about the effects of suppressing the metaphorical tension of this particular expression. There are those for whom the metaphor "word of God" is dead. They may affirm that the scriptures are the word of God, but in fact, the expression is for them simply a reverential synonym for the Bible, which is for them basically a book like other religious books. Whether as Christians they encounter it in proclamation or as scholars they devote themselves to its exegesis, the designation of what they are dealing with as "word of God" does not fire their imaginations with reverent wonder. The "is" of the metaphor has ceased to function for them.

For others, the metaphor has become literalized. They have ceased to hear the whispered "is not" that a live metaphor always carries in its affirmation. For them, the scriptures are literally God's discourse, human language (the only kind of language there is) predicated literally of God. Several consequences follow from this failure to maintain the metaphor's tension. First, such people must regard each and every word of the scriptures as equally and fully divine and thus absolutely true. Interpretation is reduced to an ascertaining of the literal meaning of the words in their written context, since, presumably, God used language perfectly to express the divine meaning. The impasses to which this leads, the absurdity of the truth claims that must be made for patent human errors in the text, are too well known to require repetition here. Nor are these problems really solved by appeal to a so-called *sacrificium intellectus* that amounts to "recognizing" as divine wisdom what even humans know is not true.

Second, literalizing the metaphor creates the insoluble problem of double causality at the same level. In order to maintain the immediate linguistic causality of God, the literalist must reduce the human author to a passive instrument, a scribe taking dictation from the divine speaker. This contention is extremely difficult to reconcile with the well-established fact that most of the biblical books, if not all, were composed over a period of time (sometimes centuries) under the literary influence of more than one person. And it is impossible to reconcile with the fact that the biblical texts carry irrefutable evidence of the very human character of their composition. This evidence appears not only in stylistic idiosyncrasies but also in an irrecusable theological pluralism in regard to even the most important matters of faith and morals, in the slow development of the Judeo-Christian moral vision, and in the historical and scientific errors and outright contradictions that cannot be eradicated or harmonized by ingenious exegesis.

By far the most serious effect of literalizing the metaphor "word of God" is that it impoverishes and distorts the mystery of divine revelation. If the Bible is literally God's discourse, then revelation means primarily, if not exclusively, propositional communication by God, and faith means primarily intellectual assent to the content of these propositions. As we will see below, divine revelation is a far richer reality, a far more personal and engaging encounter between God and humanity than can be suggested or captured by such notions. As we noted above, the literalized metaphor wreaks havoc on the religious imagination. It petrifies and renders sterile the field of understanding, substituting the procrustean bed of rigid categories for the warm soil of loving and perspicacious attention to reality.

In summary, then, the affirmation "Scripture is the word of God" is a metaphor. There is profound significance in the assertion but only if we hear, in the assertion itself, the small still voice of the "is not." Literally speaking, scripture as language consists of human words and only human words. As such they are limited and require interpretation, just as all human language does. But this human word, as we will see, is the symbolic locus of divine revelation, and this is why it is true (but not literal) to affirm that this book is indeed (metaphorically) the word of God.

B. The Referent of "Word of God": Symbolic Revelation

Having examined the expression "word of God" at the linguistic level and recognized it as a metaphor, we are in a position to inquire after the referent of this expression, the complex field of meaning to which the metaphor points and about which it stimulates us to think. Knowing that we are dealing with a metaphor, indeed, a root metaphor, we will expect its referent to be not a single or simple object but a whole complex of meaning, a rich semantic field whose significance constantly overflows the boundaries of our reflection and our language. That is exactly what we do find, for the referent of "word of God" is divine revelation, God's accepted self-gift to human beings.

It is essential for an understanding of revelation to resist the insinuation of the simplistic imagination that wants to equate revelation with the imparting of otherwise unavailable information. Revelation, as we shall see, does have a noetic dimension, but that is not its defining characteristic and certainly not the place to start an examination of the subject. Personal revelation, even in the human order, is first and foremost self-disclosure. A person chooses to invite another into her or his interiority. But unless the other accepts the invitation and reciprocates, revelation does not achieve itself. It aborts, and never without anguish. Revelation, although one person may initiate it, is necessarily a mutual experience of personal disclosure giving rise to a mutual treasuring of what has been shared, for the "what" is really a "who." The purpose and result of revelation is shared life characterized by irrevocable commitment. In other words, revelation is mutual self-gift expressive of and terminating in love. Jesus said to his disciples, "I do not call you servants . . . but I have called you friends *because* I have made known [i.e., given] to you everything that I have heard [i.e., received] from my Father" (John 15:15) [emphasis mine].

The notion of revelation always connotes both cognitive content and linguistic form. This is not because revelation is primarily a matter of intellectual knowledge or always achieved by verbalization. It is because of the mysterious nature of human language as the paradigmatic mode of the gift of self. It is interesting that in scripture sexual intercourse (which might seem to be the primary mode of self-gift) is referred to as "conversing" and "knowing" rather than vice versa. In other words, the most radical form of entering into and receiving another is not physical copulation but that mutual interiority that is achieved in true communication. Our primary mode of communication is language.

One of Martin Heidegger's great contributions to contemporary thought was his exploration of the mysterious reality of human language, of the word. He challenged the spontaneous and unreflective assumption that language is essentially a system of conventional labels that we apply to various parts of reality and then move about as linguistic counters in our efforts to communicate what we know to one another. He called language the "house of being," the place where being comes into the open in self-disclosure. Following Heidegger, the New Hermeneuts insisted that we do not really understand language; rather, we understand *through* language. Language is not so much the object of our knowing as the medium of our encounter with the real. Human language is so intimately bound up with being that it can even become transparent to the divine being, becoming a medium of encounter with God. What these thinkers appreciated in a new way is the symbolic rather than mechanical or technical nature of human language.[8]

Language is used for self-expression before it is used for the communication of neutral information. We speak, first and foremost, to bring ourselves into the light. There is truly a world of difference between the way we know another by sight and the way we know by hearing. To see another is to encounter a person's "surface," to "stand before" or "be in the presence of" another.[9] But speaking/hearing (the one always implies the other) is a mutual entering into interiority. By speaking/hearing, two persons open the walls surrounding their inner selves, and their heretofore incommunicable experiences are put in common. They both now live in a different world, a world they share, rather than in two separate worlds. They now share a common life born of communication. Speaking/hearing, especially that which takes place in intimate conversation, is not primarily the transfer of information but the mutual gift of selves. It is, then, not at all difficult to see why language is the paradigmatic model for understanding divine revelation. However, if the model is not to become rigid and thus distorting we must resolutely resist the spontaneous tendency to think of language as a system of verbal labels. Language is, in reality, the primary instance of symbolic activity, and this is the source of its power to reveal. Therefore, to understand the mysterious process of revelation, that is, of mutual self-gift, we must reflect on the nature and meaning of symbol.[10]

It must be realized that a symbol is not merely a sign, that is, an indicator of something that is other than itself, like an exit sign pointing to a door or a label identifying an object.[11] Nor is a symbol a stand-in, a substitute, for an absent reality like a promissory note representing a future payment. A symbol is, rather, the mode of presence of something that cannot be encountered in any other way. The body, as a person's way of being present, is a prime instance of symbol. It focuses our attention on several important notes of the symbol, the most obvious of which is **perceptibility.** Whether a symbol appeals directly to the senses or is an idea or image in the mind, it is essentially a perceptible reality that mediates what is otherwise imperceptible.

Second, a symbol does not symbolize in a vacuum but only in interaction with an interpreter who thereby encounters the reality being symbolized. This accounts for the peculiarly involving character of the symbol. We cannot, once something has become symbolically present to us, not respond. Even refusing to respond is a kind of response. Once we are aware of another body, for example, we must situate ourselves in relation to the person so presented. We can greet the person, make love to the person, attack, ignore, or murder the person. But we cannot not be implicated in his or her active presence to us. The symbol is **active presence** calling for interactive response.

Third, a symbol, unlike a sign, which is a separate entity standing for something other than itself, **participates directly in the presence and power of that**

which it symbolizes. It does not stand between the symbolized and the interpreter as something that must be "overcome" or "passed beyond"; rather, it mediates the symbolized to the interpreter. The symbol never exhausts the reality, that is, it never expresses it fully, but it is so intimately bound up in the symbolized that there is no way to separate them. This is dramatically evident in the case of the human body, the symbol of the person. What is done to the person's body is done to the person. Furthermore, when a person no longer presents him- or herself in the body, not only is the person no longer present to us but the body itself is trans-symbolized. It becomes a corpse. It has become the mode of presence of an absence. That is why a corpse always evokes intense emotion. It is symbolic material torn loose from its existential roots. It is a voiceless address, the stare of blind eyes, but it is emphatically not a mere empty shell, a label torn off its product.

Fourth, the symbol **embodies and thereby brings to expression** reality that it can never fully "say." The symbol is like a pinpoint of starlight shining out of the vast blackness of the sky that is its background and within which it is enmeshed in an endless network of invisible planetary existence. Because the symbol is always a minuscule "saying" emerging from the vast background of the "unsaid" it is always ambiguous, always concealing infinitely more than it reveals. One consequence of this ambiguity of symbols is that they require interpretation, yet no interpretation is ever complete, exhaustive, or adequate. We are sometimes certain that an interpretation is wrong but seldom absolutely confident that one is right. The symbol always invites to new and deeper and more adequate encounters with the real, new because our own development puts us in touch, through the symbol, with different aspects of the reality it is trying, with ever-ambiguous success, to bring to expression. Human presence in and through the body is a clear instance of this characteristic of the symbol. The roots of the symbol reach deeply into the unfathomable abyss of personal existence, but its flowers are so small and fragile and fleeting that they give us only a glimpse, a tantalizing scent of the real. We never definitively "know" another. The more deeply we communicate, the more we discover there is to know.

Symbols, then, are the bringing to expression of being in individual beings. They are the locus of our encounter with the real. Although symbolism is most perfectly realized in human beings and their expressive behavior, it is important to remember that it is not limited to human expressiveness. People have always experienced nature itself as powerfully symbolic. Light and darkness, earth and sky, the four cardinal directions, the rotating of the seasons, sun and moon and stars in their endless procession across the sky, height and depth and length and breadth, the sea and the dry land, fecundity, animals, birth and death, and all the other great realities of the cosmos speak to us humans of powers greater than ourselves and of the structure and meaning of human life.

History also is symbolic. History is not just a collection of inert facts, things that have happened. History is the human story, causally understood and narratively constructed. We tell it as a story precisely because we experience it as meaningful and symbolic. Our personal and communal history speaks to us of identity, worth, and destiny. We interpret what we experience, both what we do and what we suffer, as a kind of script, a play in which we see ourselves acting a brief but important role.

At the center and intersection of nature and history stands the human being in and through whose interpretive activity being achieves meaning. Nothing is truly symbolic unless it is interpreted, unless its meaning is grasped in understanding. The human being is a symbolic animal not only because we create symbols to express ourselves but also because it is in our interpreting that all of reality becomes truly expressive. Language is our highest form of symbol making as well as our most refined instrument of interpretation. It is the medium of both understanding and expression, and therefore it is not surprising that we metaphorically attribute speech to anything we experience as symbolic. We say that nature speaks to us, history teaches us; we speak of body language, of deafening silence, of eloquent looks. Language is the appropriate metaphor for the expressiveness of being encountered in and through interpretation.

We are now in a position to appreciate why divine revelation, God's self-gift to us, is necessarily symbolic and why we spontaneously express our experience of it through the metaphor of human speech. God, divine being, is infinitely intelligible and meaningful. The Jewish scriptures express this in the feminine image of divine wisdom who is the very expression of God, with God and equal to God from the very beginning and at work in all of creation (Prov. 8:22–31). The New Testament also affirms through the image of the preexistent Word that God comes to expression in the depths of divinity from all eternity and that that divine self-expression became human, that is, symbolically present among us, in the course of time (John 1:1–18). But these metaphorical affirmations of God's eternal self-expression are actually theological conclusions arrived at through reflection not on God as self-subsistent Spirit but on the God who has become accessible to us through revelation.

To be accessible to us, to invite us into divine intimacy, God had to approach us symbolically, that is, in and through perceptible reality. God had to achieve symbolic self-disclosure, thereby opening a locus of encounter between divinity and humanity. From earliest times human beings have interpreted nature as God's way of being present to us, as a divine gift in which the Giver could be discerned and encountered. The Israelites deepened and gave theological expression to this view of nature, including humanity, as theophanic in the doctrine of creation. Their preferential recourse to the metaphor of speech rather than to that of sight is significant. For the Jews, God was personal, and revelation was not primarily a display of neutral power witnessed by humans but an invitation to communion of life that people could freely accept. So they described God as creating everything by speaking (Gen. 1:1–2:3), thus imbuing all nature with the message of divine love. The heavens declared the glory of God; the seas thundered the divine majesty; the earth sang the praises of God's beauty and bounty (see Pss. 19, 104, and elsewhere). All of nature was "voiced" because it was God's way of speaking to the people.

The Israelites, however, made a highly original advance in symbolic interpretation. They understood their own history as a story of the relationship between themselves and God. God rescued them from slavery, made a covenant with them, gave them a land, and protected them from their enemies. Torah, the covenant Law that the people freely accepted, was not a penal code but a laying out of the coordinates of a new world, a world of shared life between God and this special people. So the Law, the symbolic place of divine self-disclosure, was recognized as preeminently God's word (see, e.g., Ps. 119, Deut. 32:44–47, and elsewhere).

The Israelites also heard God speaking in the oracles of prophets, in the prayers of priests and people, in the ordinances of kings, and in the wisdom of sages, in all the forms of human discourse that gave voice to God's intimate presence and self-disclosure in their midst. Temple and cult had a special role to play in bringing to effective expression the relationship between God and Israel. And when, over many centuries, the Jews committed their religious experience to writing, reinterpreting over and over again the symbolic expressions of their life with God, they regarded this collection of books as God's word, not because it was the only locus of divine-human encounter, the only place where God "spoke," but because it recalled to them, and interpreted for them, the myriad ways that God in the past had entered into their lives. Thus it became a source of illumination of present experience as continuously revelatory and an assurance of future encounter.

Part of the Jewish experience of divine revelation was the messianic expectation that there was still to come the full and final revelation in which nature, history, and the people itself would be integrated into an eschatological dispensation of everlasting peace and prosperity. It was the group of Jews who were eventually to be known as Christians who recognized in Jesus of Nazareth the promised messiah and in his paschal mystery the inauguration of messianic times. They interpreted his life and teaching, and especially his death and resurrection, as the full and definitive revelation of God. They came to see him as the very presence of God, the ultimate symbolic expression of God, who not only invited humanity to share in divine life but who came in person to share human life. The proclamation, and eventually the committing to writing in the New Testament, of all that was experienced in and through Jesus was an integral part of the experience itself and made the revelatory experience available to those who came after. Indeed, the very life of the community constituted by the indwelling of the Spirit of the risen Jesus became the locus of continued and renewed encounter with him and through him with God.

The root metaphor "word of God" embraces and integrates this whole range of divine self-giving, of God's symbolic self-disclosure and sharing of life. Creation, Israel's covenant history, prophetic oracle, sapiential discourse, apocalyptic vision, Torah and cult, the Jewish scriptures, the person and mission of Jesus, the proclamation of the Gospel, the New Testament, the ongoing life of the Christian community—all are part of the great mystery of God's self-gift, that is, of divine revelation. Because revelation is the gift of self, something that we humans realize most fully through linguistic communication, the best way we have to evoke it is to speak of God "conversing" with us. Indeed we call Jesus, understood as the definitive self-gift of God, the Word of God incarnate. This is equivalent to calling him the great symbol of God, the locus of symbolic revelation. The root metaphor "word of God" derives its perennial life and immense power from the fact that it is the linguistic evocation of the reality of symbolic revelation.

The referent of the metaphor "word of God" is, then, a complex reality much broader than the written scriptures. Indeed, for the Christian the primordial referent of the term is Jesus himself, because all other symbolic forms of the divine self-gift find their integrating reference point in him. They are either preparation for or witness to him. However, it is easy to see why the metaphor "word of God" tends to be not only virtually equated with sacred scripture but literalized when so applied, whereas it retains its metaphorical tension when applied to creation, sacred history, or Jesus. Scripture is literally composed of words; it is human discourse. Furthermore, we regard it as a privileged locus of divine self-revelation that is most readily understood according to the model of human self-revelation in language. To call the scriptures God's word (a metaphor) in human words (a literal attribution) leads very easily to thinking of God's self-gift (revelation) as literal speech. We have already attended to the problems that literalization of the metaphor causes. But one other effect of failing to maintain the metaphorical tension of the expression "word of God" when it is applied to scripture is that it tends to obscure the full range of the reality of divine revelation. Scripture becomes the exclusive locus of revelation and finally is simply equated with divine revelation.

Just as we must say that sacred scripture is (and is not) the word of God, so we cannot say that the Bible is, purely and simply, revelation. It is more correct to say that the Bible is (potentially) revelatory than to say that it is revelation. Scripture is a privileged witness to the divine self-gift that has been taking place from the moment of creation and will continue until the end of time. But it is symbolic witness, and that means that it becomes the actual locus of divine-human encounter only in the act of interpretation. This interpretation will always be an arduous task because symbols are inherently and invincibly ambiguous, simultaneously revealing and concealing.

Furthermore, the text cannot be interpreted except within the context of the whole reality of the word of God. The text, for reasons we will discuss later, has a privileged position in this vast and rich complex, but it is not, in abstraction from the total reality of revelation, the word of God. Even the risen Christ, the Word of God incarnate, could not interpret himself and his paschal mystery to his disillusioned disciples except against the background of the Jewish scriptures as witness to the whole revelation experience of Israel (Luke 24:13–35). Peter and the other apostles could not proclaim the Easter Gospel without recourse to that same background (e.g., Acts 2:1–36). So, too, for the Christian of today, the New Testament in isolation is not purely and simply the word of God. It is a privileged locus of divine encounter only when it is interpreted as an integral part of the whole mystery of God's historical self-gift to humanity.

C. The Bible as Word of God: Sacrament

Probably the most frequent use of the expression "word of God" is in reference to the Bible itself, that is, to the written text. Preachers who have just read a passage from the Bible proclaim, "This is the word of the Lord," or, "Here ends the reading of the word of God," and their listeners respond with an acclamation of praise and thanksgiving. Often enough, at this point in a liturgical celebration the book of the scriptures itself is elevated for veneration by the faithful. Furthermore, in some Christian communions after the book itself is venerated it is enthroned in a special place and honored with such marks of reverence as lighted candles and incense. Our question at this point concerns the relationship between the Bible itself and the reality designated by the expression "word of God."

This question is actually twofold. The *Bible* refers both to the written text as meaningful language and to the book itself, that is, the physical object composed of this text. The term *word of God,* as we have just noted, is used in reference to both, and we must therefore raise the question of whether either or both usages are appropriate and, if so, in what sense.

Let us attend first of all to the Bible as meaningful written text (as scripture), in contradistinction to the Bible as physical object (as book). Vatican II declared that the Church has always honored scripture "as it venerates the Body of the Lord" in the Eucharist.[12] Although this statement, at least in respect to the Roman communion, is more descriptive of what the Church should have done than what it actually has done throughout most of its history, it provides us with a very useful model for understanding the nature of the Bible as sacred text. Scripture, like Eucharist, is best understood as sacrament.

Sacraments, if we follow the theology of Saint Augustine, are a particular kind of symbol. They are symbols that are peculiarly effective in mediating the divine-human encounter (i.e., in theological terms, grace), or some aspect thereof, because they are especially explicit and expressive. They articulate the mystery with extraordinary clarity and power. This is so partly because of the symbolic material itself (the words and actions involved) and partly because the Christian community, on the basis of these rites' close association with the person and ministry of the historical Jesus, has established them as privileged symbols of the presence and power of the risen Lord. Thus, while not entirely relieved of their ambiguity as symbols, they have a clarity and transparence for the community that other religious symbols do not have. They are recognized everywhere in the community, and they mediate the mystery in ways that can be fairly universally understood.

Precisely because of their explicitness and the clarity of our formulations about them sacraments are open to certain misunderstandings and misuses that do not so readily affect other religious symbols. We will attend to this problem in due course, but for the moment it suffices to note that sacraments are symbols in use in the Christian community that, in bringing certain aspects of the Christian mystery to articulation, tend to stabilize and even localize as well as to clarify our experience of the mystery.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the body of Christ. "Body of Christ" is a metaphor whose postresurrection referent is the Church, the community of believers who corporately make the risen Christ symbolically present and active in this world between the ascension (the end of Jesus' historical presence among his disciples) and the parousia (Jesus' return in glory at the end of time). This mystery of Christ's presence and action is symbolically realized in all of the saving actions of the community but is most clearly and powerfully articulated in that sacramental action in which the community comes together (becomes corporate) to do explicitly that which all of its action is in reality: thanksgiving to God in the Spirit for the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ and commitment to extending that salvation to the ends of the earth by doing in memory of Jesus what Jesus did for us, namely, laying down our lives for those we love. Thus, the term *eucharist* really designates the entire saving action of the Christian community as body of Christ. But the Eucharist, the community's liturgical self-expression as worshiping and ministering body of Christ, has a peculiar power to bring this mystery to full and explicit articulation.

Sacred scripture is the sacrament of the word of God. As we have seen, the real referent of the metaphor "word of God" is the entire mystery of divine revelation, God's received self-gift to us in and through such symbols as creation, sacred history, Jesus himself, and the life of the believing community. In all of these ways God "speaks" to us. However, this divine self-communication is most explicitly and powerfully articulated when the scripture is read (interpreted and understood), especially when this is done by public proclamation reverently attended to in the context of the community's liturgical action. This is not to say that the reading of scripture is the only or even the most important instance of divine revelation, any more than we can say that the Eucharist is the only or even the most important realization of the presence and action of Christ in the world. To say that the biblical text (as read and understood) is the sacrament of the word of God is to say that this mystery here comes to articulation with a clarity and transparency that focuses our attention on the mystery of divine revelation and thus fosters our attentiveness to the word of God wherever we encounter it. Just as it is futile, indeed sinful, to participate in the Eucharist if one fails to "discern the body of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:29) in the Christian community, so it is futile, and at least irreverent in the extreme, to proclaim or listen to scripture if one is deaf to the word of God in one's life.

Let us turn now to our second question concerning the Bible as word of God, namely, how the expression applies to the book itself, the physical object composed of the scriptural text. H.-G. Gadamer, in talking about the mode of being of art, supplies a very useful model for understanding the Bible as the word of God, one to which we will return in chapter 5. Gadamer distinguishes between the **art object** and the **work of art.**[13] An art object is a physical entity like a statue, a painting, a musical score, or the script of a play. The art object is only truly a work of art when it is being contemplated, heard, or played. In other words, whereas the art object has continuous existence as a physical entity, the work of art has an intermittent mode of being. It is actualized in the act of appreciation. Between such acts it "lapses" into nonbeing. It perdures as a possibility inherent in the object, and this is what makes the object itself valuable. The object not only grounds the possibility of existence of the work of art but stabilizes its meaning in such a way that each valid actualization is related to every other valid actualization in recognizable ways.

The biblical text as physical object, that is, the book of the scriptures, is a religious art object. It is the stable physical entity that has continuous existence. But the scripture as meaningful, as sacrament of the word of God, is a work of art. It has an intermittent mode of existence. It must "come into being" as meaning by actualization that occurs through reading, that is, through interpretation. Between readings it "lapses" into nonbeing. The importance of the text as physical entity is precisely that it grounds the possibility of future actualizations of the word of God. Furthermore, the text stabilizes the meaning as an ideal structure so that future valid interpretations are related to earlier ones.

If we combine this insight into the importance of the art object in the life of the work of art with an appreciation of the role of material entities in sacramental actions, especially in the paradigmatic sacramental actions of baptism and eucharist, we can readily understand the place of honor accorded the Bible even when it is not actually being read. Just as the font of baptismal water and the reserved bread of the eucharistic celebration are regarded as sacred even when the sacramental rites are not being actualized, so the book of the scriptures is surrounded with reverence even when it is not being read. Baptismal water and eucharistic bread are only fully sacramental within the context of sacramental action. But the very purpose of preserving the elements even after the completion of the action is to evoke the action and thus to extend its efficacy further into daily life by memory and affection. Baptismal water and eucharistic bread are not "ordinary" bread and water, even outside the immediate liturgical context. Indeed, the sacrament is never completely "absent" as long as they are present. Thus we can, if we understand what we are doing, even refer to these elements themselves as sacraments and meaningfully venerate them. The same is true for the book of the scriptures. To enthrone it, venerate it, bless people with it, flank it with candles, and honor it with incense is entirely appropriate so long as the purpose is to acknowledge the privileged relationship between this object and the full actualization of the word of God in proclamation and hearing.

The problem with sacramental objects is that they always tend to two forms of distortion. The first is the temptation to make the sacramental object a magical object, to invest the object itself with power, in isolation from the context in which the reality comes to actualization. Some people who would never think of meditating on scripture and who seldom or never participate in liturgical celebrations where the word of God is proclaimed staunchly defend the importance of having a family Bible on the living room shelf. The book itself is some kind of protection, a talisman or charm. This is sheer superstition, however harmlessly pious it might be.

The second temptation is more serious, namely, to make an idol of the sacramental object. When a sacramental object becomes an idol it becomes the object of our worship. It is no longer transparent; it no longer functions symbolically by mediating a reality that transcends it. It has become opaque, an obstacle to encounter with the divine, because it has, in fact, replaced the sacred. Idolatry is the replacement of God with something other than God. The most likely candidates for such a replacement are the material realities that mediate God to us. There have certainly been periods in the history of the Church when the eucharistic bread became more idol (at least for the common people) than sacrament, when liturgy was more magic than symbolic action. The same must be said of the book of the scriptures.

In summary, then, the biblical text as meaningful is the sacrament of the word of God, that is, of the mystery of divine revelation. It is sacrament in the fully actualized sense of the word only when it is being read, when it is coming to event as meaning through interpretation. However, the book that preserves and localizes for us the possibility of such events of meaning and that stabilizes the meaning and so gives it continuity in the community is a symbolic object that is fittingly venerated so long as it plays its proper role in the context of the entire mystery. The danger of magic and idolatry is not to be underestimated, but neither should it lead to irreverent casualness in our approach to this text that represents the permanent possibility of the event of revelation in our midst.

D. Theological Reflection on Scripture as Word of God: The Sacred Character of the Bible

All that has been said so far about scripture as word of God has assumed that the Bible is indeed a unique and sacred book. This is the faith of all Christian communities whatever their theoretical leanings in terms of interpretation.

Throughout Christian history the Church has attempted to bring to explicit theological formulation its faith convictions about the sacred character of scripture, and this has resulted in the development of a vocabulary about the Bible that we must now briefly explore. A set of affirmations about scripture as word of God has been compressed into a series of words that have not only expressed these faith convictions but become the rallying points for much of the interdenominational polemic over the Bible.

The terms that require examination are frequently treated as if they belong to a single series denoting various characteristics or qualities of the Bible as sacred scripture. Such is not the case. Two of the terms, *revelation* and *inspiration*, are concerned with God's relation to the content of the Bible. One term, *infallibility*, concerns the relation of the author to the content. And three of the terms, *inerrancy*, *authority*, and *normativity*, concern the relation of the content to the readers. However, the meaning assigned to any one of the terms affects the meaning of some or all of the others. Consequently, it is difficult to establish a starting point for this examination and very difficult to examine any one of the terms without engaging all of them. In the attempt to clarify the meaning of each of these terms, I will raise two kinds of questions.

First, each of these terms is really a verbal cipher for a (collection of) faith affirmation(s) about scripture. These affirmations have long theological histories involving efforts to say what the affirmations mean and to explain how whatever is being affirmed can be understood in the available categories (usually philosophical) of the day. The ever-actual temptation is to lose the content of the affirmation in the labyrinth of its theological history. Consequently, I will attempt to begin the examination of the meaning of each term with a *simple statement of the faith affirmation* about scripture that it involves, without regard to the correctness or adequacy of the belief or to the history of its explanation. Next, I will raise the question about *whether the affirmation is true and/or meaningful and, if so, in what sense.* At that point I will also state explicitly the theoretical position in regard to this affirmation that is implicit in the approach to scripture taken in the rest of this study.

1. Revelation

The predication of revelation to scripture is a faith affirmation that the contents of the Bible are, or in some sense are related to, divine communication. Strictly speaking, the relation of the text to revelation is the ground and content of the affirmation that the scriptures are the word of God, that is, what God has "to say" to humanity.

The question of revelation, including its possibility and actuality, its extent, its nature, and its mode, is the most foundational question in theology.[14] The answer (whether explicit or implicit)[15] given to this question determines not only the shape and content of a particular theology but the very possibility of elaborating a theology at all. To attempt to trace, even cursorily, the history of theological reflection on revelation or to situate the position operative in this study in relation to major theories of revelation would take us completely beyond the scope of this project.[16] However, it is appropriate at this point to state, in summary fashion, how the statement that the Bible is revelatory is understood and operative in all that follows.

From what has already been said in this chapter, especially in the section on symbolic revelation as the referent of the expression "word of God," it should be obvious that not only the possibility but the actuality of divine revelation is being affirmed. Revelation is by no means restricted to the Bible. Indeed, as possibility, divine revelation must be seen as coextensive with human experience. Insofar as the divine desire to give Godself is concerned, all of human experience is meant to be revelatory. For various reasons pertaining to the human limitations and sinfulness that make individuals nonreceptive to the divine self-gift, it is not the case that divine revelation is actually coextensive with human experience. Only in Jesus of Nazareth do we see an entire human existence so fully actualized by the divine self-gift that we can affirm that he *is* Word of God (i.e., revelation) incarnate. Thus Jesus in his person, work, and paschal mystery is seen to be the paradigmatic instance of divine revelation.

In speaking of revelation as symbolic, I have taken a particular position on the nature and mode of the divine self-gift. Without denying the essential importance of the cognitive dimension of revelation, a symbolic theory places the emphasis on the interpersonal content and mode of revelation. The finality of revelation is not primarily an increase in speculative or practical knowledge but shared life, which necessarily involves knowledge but is not exclusively constituted by it. The symbolic mode of revelation embraces the whole range of perceptible reality but, by its very nature, is preeminently realized in language (taken inclusively rather than restrictively), the most effective way human beings have of rendering their personhood intersubjectively available.

In consequence of the foregoing, the Bible enjoys a privileged position among the multiple actualizations of revelation. As witness, in language, to the most fully appropriated experience of revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition (and most especially in Jesus), it grounds and governs the ongoing revelatory experience of Christians in succeeding ages. Chapter 4 will be concerned with how the New Testament is related to the Christ-event and how it mediates that event for succeeding generations of believers. But for the moment, suffice it to say that the theory of the relation of the New Testament to revelation operative in this study is essentially identical with that affirmed at the end of the gospel according to John: "These [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). By "believing" is meant not primarily intellectual assent to propositions but participation in the signs (that is, in the words and works by which Jesus opened to his disciples the possibility of sharing his own divine filiation, becoming children of God) culminating in that oneness with Jesus, and through him with God, that he came to offer us.

Anyone who predicates revelation of scripture intends to affirm that the contents of this book bear some special relationship to divine self-communication. The differences among scholars and communities of faith concern how one understands "communication," what one thinks the special relationship is, and how one thinks the Bible functions in mediating that communication to the reader or hearer. Obviously, the answers given to these questions will heavily influence any theory of interpretation. They will also suggest how the predication of revelation to scripture can best be formulated. In terms of the position already taken on the symbolic nature of revelation, it would seem that statements like "Scripture *is* divine revelation" or "The Bible *contains* divine revelation" should be avoided as more conducive to misunderstanding than to clarity. It would be more accurate to say that scripture witnesses to revelation provided that this is not understood to mean that the Bible merely provides a record of past revelational experiences (a topic that will be taken up in greater detail in chapter 5). Perhaps the most adequate formulation would be that scripture, by witnessing to foundational revelation, constitutes a privileged possibility of revelation in the present. Scripture is a medium of the divine self-gift for all who approach it in faith.

2. Inspiration

The faith affirmation that the Bible is inspired intends to affirm the divine influence on the writer, the text, the reader, the reading, or some combination of these in virtue of which the text is rightly regarded as sacred scripture or word of God. It is, therefore, very closely related to the notion of revelation and in some presentations or explanations of the two terms they are considered virtually synonymous.

The theological questions concerning inspiration are multiple: the meaning and nature of inspiration, its location (in the author, the text, the reader, and/or reading), its extent (whether all of scripture or only certain parts are inspired and whether there are degrees of inspiration), its effects (whether inspiration makes the Bible revelatory, invests it with divine authority, renders it inerrant), its uniqueness (whether biblical inspiration differs essentially from the inspiration of other religious or artistic classics), and the mode of its occurrence (prophetic ecstasy, dictation, illumination, social or historical processes within the community).

Tracing the long and complicated development of reflection on biblical inspiration is both beyond the scope and outside the interests of this essay.[17] However, certain points in that development can serve as markers by which to map the theological territory within which the hypothesis I will propose can be situated. In the period immediately following Pentecost the early Church affirmed without question the inspiration, that is, the divine source, of "the scriptures," by which it meant the Jewish scriptures that would later be called by Christians the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:16–17 and 2 Pet. 1:19–21). In other words, the *fact* of biblical inspiration did not become problematic until Christian writings began to be considered authoritative for the Church.

As the canonization of Christian writings proceeded, the questioning of the fact of biblical inspiration in regard to certain books arose from two directions. On the one hand, some Christians, like the second-century writer Marcion, questioned and even denied the inspiration of the Old Testament. This position was rejected by the Church, which continued to regard the Jewish scriptures as divinely inspired sources for Christian faith.[18] On the other hand, disputes over the canonical status of certain Christian writings, some of which (e.g., the *Didache* and the Christian apocrypha) were eventually excluded and others of which (e.g., Revelation) were eventually included, raised the question of the relationship between canonicity and inspiration.[19] It is important to note that the Church never considered inspiration the grounds or the criterion for including a writing in the canon but, once a book was canonized, it was regarded as inspired.

Although the inspiration of certain works prior to their inclusion in the canon was questioned at various times, biblical scholars from the beginning until quite recently (i.e., until the Protestant Reformation) never questioned whether those books accepted as canonical were inspired. In other words, the question was whether a given book was biblical, not whether biblical books were inspired. However, since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, during which the Bible came to be studied as a book like other books and the thoroughly human origins, development, and character of various biblical books became evident, many scholars have come to question whether the Bible is inspired in any unique sense of that term and/or whether the question of its inspiration is even significant.[20]

A second point from which to plot the geography of the current discussion is the *explanation of the fact* of inspiration. From earliest times Christian scholars debated whether the term *inspired* denoted God's influence on the writer (the prophetic model of inspiration characteristic of scholars like Augustine) or the character of the text resulting from divine influence upon it (as Origen taught, in his struggle against the Montanist teaching on prophetic inspiration). Although recent theology has tended to concentrate on the quality of the text, the discussion from the patristic through the medieval and Reformation periods concentrated on the writer. In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas enriched the prophetic model of the Fathers by using the Aristotelian philosophical categories of efficient and instrumental causality to explain how God as primary efficient cause could be the true author of scripture without denying the real, though instrumental, secondary causality of the human writer. Reformation authors usually preferred a less philosophically "loaded" version of the prophetic model that presented God as virtually dictating to the biblical authors the content (and, according to some, even the words) of the biblical texts.[21]

In the last few decades, as biblical scholarship has revealed the multiple authorship and long compositional histories of many biblical books, scholars like Karl Rahner (a Catholic)[22] and Paul Achtemeier (a Protestant)[23] have realized how difficult it is to apply the notion of prophetic inspiration to biblical "authors" and have tried to develop historical, communitarian, and interactional theories of inspiration.[24] Currently, the discussion of the process of inspiration, like the discussion of the fact of inspiration, has ceased to claim much attention from theologians except among scholars in the most fundamentalist denominations.

A third point from which to map the terrain of this discussion is the *theology* of inspiration. No matter how one thinks God and the human author and/or community interacted in the inspiration process, if one accepts the fact of inspiration, one must raise the question of its theological meaning or significance. The spectrum of theological positions extends from an affirmation of the absolute inerrancy of the text resulting from miraculous divine intervention in its production to fideism and/or deistic renunciation of any attempt to understand the meaning of the affirmation of biblical inspiration.

At the former pole we find theories of divine dictation and plenary verbal inspiration. Because these theories almost inevitably lead to fundamentalism in interpretation and to irresolvable conflicts with empirical data, I consider them theologically untenable. At the latter pole we encounter not only simple believers who feel no need to explain their faith in the divine authorship of scripture but also sophisticated scholars who, while freely associating themselves with the faith of the Church that affirms the theological implications of inspiration ("we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures"),[25] despair of the possibility that anything really illuminating can be said about such an empirically unavailable datum as divine inspiration. In between these two extremes are the positions of writers like Thomas Hoffman, who have attempted to integrate the notion of divine inspiration into theological theories of the Bible as sacred scripture that are both faithful to the Church's traditional belief and compatible with publicly defensible philosophical and scientific positions.[26] The approach I will suggest belongs in this middle range.

Any attempt at a genuine theology of scripture must situate the question of inspiration within some overall theological framework and decide within which area of theology this question belongs. Most of the better theories have placed the question of inspiration within the overall discussion of divine-human cooperation. The starting point for such theories has varied in the course of history, some theologians starting with the divine partner, some with the human, and others with the interaction between them. Any such approach will carry, and be limited by, the intelligibility and conviction of the theory of nature and grace to which it belongs.

In what follows I would like to propose a different kind of approach to inspiration, namely, a linguistic one, in an attempt, on the one hand, to liberate the theological understanding of inspiration from overdependence on the content of particular theologies and, on the other hand, to take more serious account of the legitimate ascendancy of secularization (not secularism) in contemporary theological reflection. Rather than starting with a model of divine-human cooperation and asking how this model illuminates the special case of the influence of God on what is, from another standpoint, a human product, I propose starting with an examination of how faith affirmations (for that is what the affirmation of inspiration is) are related to their subject matter and to other kinds of affirmations.

The affirmation that the Bible is inspired belongs to the series of affirmations bearing on such matters as the creation of the universe and the divinity of the human being Jesus of Nazareth. They have in common their concern with revelation occurring in phenomena that are empirically available and can be adequately explained (not as revelatory but as natural entities and/or processes) without attending in any way to their revelatory character.

To affirm that God *created* the universe is not to affirm that God performed the chronologically first act in the causal series that scientists call evolution. Creation does not belong to the series of finite causes at all. Creation refers to the rootedness of all that is in Being itself, which is not one being among others but the ground, foundation, and source of all beings, the ultimate ontological explanation of why there is something rather than nothing. However, the affirmation of creation, though it includes this ontological insight, goes beyond it to affirm that this universe, so grounded, is disclosive of God, who is identical with Being itself. We are not speaking here of a reasoning process by which the existence and/or attributes of God are affirmed on the basis of what is seen in the universe. We are speaking of the possible but nonnecessary perception (faith) of divine self-disclosure (revelation) that terminates in that shared life discussed above under the heading of symbolic revelation. To affirm creation is to live in a new world, a world one shares with the Creator. The affirmation of creation is not primarily an intellectual assent to a proposition about reality but a personal engagement characterized by humility, gratitude, reverence, and all those other qualities that define the properly religious attitude of the human being before God.

The same structure is verified in regard to the faith affirmation of the *incarnation.* Jesus of Nazareth was a human being, completely understandable as such,[27] indeed, understood as such by most of his contemporaries. To affirm that he is divine is to profess having perceived in him something that could be but does not have to be perceived, namely, the definitive historical instance of the full coincidence between divine self-giving and human experience. In other words, we do not reason from what Jesus did or said to his divinity; rather, through his words and works we experience him as disclosive of the self-giving God and therefore affirm his divinity.

The *inspiration* of the Bible involves the same kind of experience. The Bible is a book written entirely by human beings. However difficult or even actually impossible it might be to trace the origins of some parts of it or to understand the material it contains, there is no question that there is a human explanation that can account for everything that this book is as an empirically available human artifact. To affirm that this book is divinely inspired is to profess to have experienced it as uniquely disclosive of the divine, which grounds the affirmation that it is influenced by God in some special way.

In all three cases we are dealing with faith statements. These statements do not bear exclusively or primarily upon the empirical phenomena in question, namely, the universe, the human being Jesus of Nazareth, or the book Christians call the Bible. They bear upon the disclosure in and by these entities of something that **can be perceived but does not have to be.** By recognizing that what is thus perceived does not have to be perceived, we are recognizing that the disclosive power is not in the same "series" with the phenomenal being through which that power operates. In other words, we are designating these realities, properly speaking, as symbolic expressions of the divine. The perceptible realities are ontologically autonomous; they are self-sufficient as grounds of experience and explanation. It is entirely possible, and intellectually defensible, to account for the universe in terms of natural causal factors in the process of evolution, for Jesus by human generation, and for the Bible by human processes of authorship, however different from modern ones they might be.

The affirmation of divine disclosure is, strictly speaking, a faith affirmation. The believer claims to perceive what some others, confronted with the same phenomenon, do not perceive. The most the believer can do is describe and explain the experience. It is useless to try to prove, from the phenomenon itself, *that* it is disclosive of the divine, and even more futile to try to demonstrate that the phenomenon *necessitates* such perception the way the pigmentation of an apple necessitates the predication of color or the existence of a disease necessitates the postulation of a noxious cause.

The point of the foregoing is that faith affirmations are of a different order from other types of affirmation, whether the latter are of a scientific or a philosophical nature. Both of the latter must be potentially demonstrable to anyone who can follow the demonstration. Faith affirmations are more akin to poetic discourse. They are verbal testimonies to what has been disclosed but to which one cannot reason and whose truth one cannot demonstrate. This does not mean that faith affirmations are a mere reading into reality of what cannot be seen by others because it is not really there. Faith affirmations arise from our encounter with empirical reality. But, whereas the ordinary mode of perception terminates in the empirical phenomenon or what can be derived from it by human modes of intellection, the faith mode of perception terminates in that which is symbolically presented in the empirical phenomenon. Faith bears upon reality presented in but not coterminous with or reducible to empirical phenomena. In other words, faith is an **objectively grounded but nonnecessary response** to that which is disclosed in and through phenomena that can be but need not be experienced as disclosive of the divine.

To return now to the question of biblical inspiration, I propose to identify it as the subject of a faith affirmation about the revelatory character of sacred scripture. Inspiration is not strictly identical with revelation, because inspiration refers primarily to the divine influence in virtue of which scripture is revelatory rather than to the revelatory character itself. The two terms are reciprocally illuminating as are creation and cosmic revelation, and incarnation and Jesus as Word of God. Scripture is disclosive (revelatory) because of the divine influence upon it (inspiration); we recognize it as inspired (divinely influenced) because we experience it as revelatory (disclosive). Inspiration focuses our attention on the divine influence at work in the text and reader while revelation focuses our attention on the disclosive potential of the text as it comes to actualization.

Against the background of this approach to inspiration in terms of the kind of affirmation it involves and the relationship of that affirmation to its subject matter, we can now attend briefly to the subquestions about inspiration noted at the beginning of this section: its extent and location, effects, uniqueness, and mode of occurrence.

Obviously, within this framework of explanation, inspiration would have to be considered *coextensive* with the biblical phenomenon itself, although it would operate differently at the different moments of that phenomenon. In the composition of the text, one would be dealing with the divine influence operative in the interaction of the tradition, the situation, and the writer(s) by which the divine disclosure comes to expression in revelatory text.[28] At the time of reading/hearing the divine influence is operative in the interaction among the existential situation of hearing/reading, the disclosive potential of the text, and the hearer/reader as focus of that interaction. Inspiration would be most improperly predicated of the text itself considered simply as a book, that is, when it is not functioning sacramentally in any sense of the word.

The primary *effect* of inspiration, as has already been said, is the revelatory character of sacred scripture. But the approach we have taken rules out the possibility of deducing from the nature of inspiration the specific effects of divine influence on the text itself. The effects of divine inspiration will have to be discovered in and through the community's historical experience with the text as revelatory, just as the meaning of creation and incarnation are discovered in the unfolding of human experience with the universe and with Jesus the Christ. We can certainly expect that the ultimate effects will be salutary, but we have no grounds for an a priori expectation that that salutary influence will take the form of scientific or historical inerrancy or the communication of data strictly unknowable from (not to mention incompatible with) natural sources. I will suggest in chapters 5 and 6 that inspiration does not necessarily guarantee even the moral truth and/or acceptability of everything scripture presents.

The question of the *uniqueness* of biblical inspiration is the question of whether biblical inspiration is essentially or at least qualitatively different from the inspiration operative in other (religious and/or artistic) classics, such as Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* or Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle.* In terms of the understanding of inspiration suggested so far, this question is ill formulated. If inspiration is the divine influence (on production, text, and reading/hearing interaction) that grounds the disclosive potential of scripture, then it is strictly impossible to examine inspiration itself, either scientifically or philosophically. Indeed, if it had been possible to identify inspiration and/or distinguish it from other factors, the early Church would surely have used it as a criterion for the establishment of the canon. If those closest to the origins of the New Testament writings could not discern either the presence or the distinctive character of biblical inspiration, we can safely assume that it is not possible to do so.

It would seem more to the point to start at the other end. The Bible is unique, not because it is inspired or inspired in a way that other works are not, but because of a combination of notes (of which inspiration is one) that makes this book the Church's primary sacrament of the Word of God. Biblical inspiration is unique because the Bible is special; the Bible is not special because its inspiration is unique.

Acknowledging that many written works are powerfully disclosive of the divine and some much more so than some parts of the Bible involves no denigration of the Bible. The influence of the Spirit of God (which is what we mean by inspiration) is not limited to the Bible any more than the presence of God is limited to the Church. The fear that should some noncanonical book be "discovered" to be inspired it would have to be included in the Bible rests on the false premise that the criterion of canonicity is inspiration. Experience has established that many classics of the Christian tradition mediate the encounter with God. They are indeed inspired; they are not, however, biblical. In short, biblical inspiration is unique because of its relation to the Bible, not the other way around.

We turn, finally, to the question that has been the focus of the most involved discussions of inspiration in the last century, namely, the *mode* of biblical inspiration. How did/does this divine influence occur? There are numerous ways to approach this question.[29] One can inquire how God can (and therefore presumably would) influence a creature (either the producer or the product or the reader in this case); one can inquire how the creature can be influenced without detriment to its integrity and proper autonomy. The approach indicated by what has preceded would be quite different. It would begin with the understanding of symbolic revelation and follow it through its realization in creation, history, incarnation, and sacramental reality in general, with scripture understood as a special instance of the last.

As has been said, divine revelation is potentially coextensive with human experience. The entire created universe in its historical unfolding is potentially disclosive of God, whose self-giving intention is integral to all God's works. But revelation is an interpersonal reality. It comes to actualization only in human experience, only in the human response of reception and reciprocal self-gift. For various reasons, much of human experience, though potentially revelatory, is actually empty of revelation. The universe is creation, in the fully revelatory sense, only sporadically and imperfectly for most people most of the time. Only in Jesus did the boundless divine desire to give encounter the fully adequate human response, with the result that in his human experience revelation was finally perfectly actualized. He is the Word made flesh, God incarnate, symbolic revelation fully achieved. The scriptures, from a Christian perspective, are the bringing to symbolic disclosure in written discourse of that which is primordially disclosed in Jesus. Scripture is the resymbolization of the paradigmatic symbol. Thus, even the Old Testament for the Christian takes on its full significance only in relation to Jesus Christ.

The mode of inspiration, then, refers to the way symbolic revelation occurs in and through human interaction with a text under the influence of the Spirit of God. It is best understood in terms of the fully human processes that brought the text into existence and by which it is actualized as revelation down through the ages. The processes of origination of the text included the experience of revelation in specific historical circumstances in the faith community that lived the tradition about which and out of which the authors wrote. The talents of individuals and their personal, historical, ideological, and literary limitations were integral to the process. In some cases the process involved research and multiple redactions of sources. In every case it involved the use of a specific human language operating through deliberately selected literary genres. As the text is read by successive generations, the whole complex of processes involved in interpretation and appropriation comes into play. The work of translation, philological analysis, textual criticism, historical and archaeological research, literary criticism, and a host of other forms of exegetical and critical endeavor belong to this work of interpretation, as do liturgical contextualizing, preaching and teaching, and personal meditation.

In short, the question of mode of inspiration shifts our focus from that which is perceived in and through the biblical text to the actual human experience with the text that mediates revelation under the influence of the Spirit of God. To ask how inspiration takes place is not to ask for a description of the divine operations but for a phenomenology of the human experience of divine revelation mediated by the revelatory text of scripture.

3. *Infallibility and Inerrancy*

The notions of infallibility and inerrancy are often used interchangeably, even though infallibility (the incapability of erring in judgment or failing to bring true and correct judgments to adequate expression) is more properly applied to the author and inerrancy (the freedom from error that infallibility guarantees) is more properly predicated of the text.

Infallibility and inerrancy as essential notes of scripture are integral to a fundamentalistic position that understands scripture to have originated miraculously (e.g., by divine dictation or verbal inspiration) and therefore to contain propositional revelation that makes an absolutely authoritative claim upon and constitutes the unique and absolute norm of faith. The importance of inerrancy of the text in such a theology of scripture derives from the latter's conception of revelation as propositional. If propositions are to be authoritative, they must be true, and if they are to be absolutely authoritative, they must be absolutely true. If some propositions in scripture are false or mistaken, then, in principle, any or all could be, and the ground of faith would be destroyed. Hence the importance of maintaining the infallibility of the authors. They did not err because they could not err; therefore, all of the propositions in the Bible are true (inerrant), authoritative, and normative.

Obviously, such a conception of scripture in general, and of its infallibility and inerrancy in particular, is incompatible with the understanding of scripture proposed in this chapter. The primary objection to the fundamentalistic notion of inerrancy is not that it is an indefensible claim in view of the evident factual and even theological and moral errors in the Bible. Although this is true, the primary objection is not empirical but theological, namely, that attributing inerrancy to the Bible constitutes a kind of biblical Docetism. It is analogous to such christological assertions as that Jesus had all possible knowledge, even that not yet discovered in his day, or that he only appeared to die but could not really do so because he did not really have a material or physical, therefore mortal, nature. Inerrancy in the Bible, like immortality or omniscience in Jesus, would constitute a denaturing of the symbolic medium of revelation into a thin disguise for an overpowering divine presence that alone is real. Just as an omniscient or immortal Jesus only appears to be a genuine human being (since human beings are, by nature, limited in knowledge and mortal), an inerrant Bible would only appear to be a genuine human text. A theology of symbolic revelation, by contrast, affirms the reality of the symbolic medium and takes completely seriously the consequences of its reality for the occurrence and nature of revelation.

A second theological problem raised by the affirmation that the Bible is inerrant is the conception of faith and of God that it involves. Essentially, an inerrant text makes not only an absolute claim on faith but a necessary one. Symbolic revelation, as has been said, grounds a possible but nonnecessary response because it is, of its very nature, ambiguous. The symbol simultaneously reveals and conceals. Consequently, faith remains a free, that is, a nonnecessitated, response. An inerrant scripture admits of only one response, namely, unqualified intellectual assent accompanied by absolute moral submission. In other words, the notion of inerrancy in scripture is the end of a fine thread that, if followed, leads to a conception of God as an absolute, authoritarian monarch whose will is clear and who brooks no dispute. Symbolic revelation is characteristic of a God who offers and invites but does not compel response.

Acceptance of an approach to scripture as symbolic revelation necessitates joining those scholars who have, increasingly in recent years, called for the discreet but definitive burial of the notion of biblical inerrancy on the grounds that it solves a few spurious problems by creating numerous real ones.[30]

4. Authority and Normativity

Having rejected the proposition that biblical authority (that is, the divine claim of scripture upon believers individually and as a community of faith) is derived from inerrancy and/or infallibility, we must reexamine the question of whether and in what sense scripture can be considered authoritative.

Authority is a very slippery concept because it is applied in so many different ways to very different entities. We speak of authoritative people, statements, and positions; of the authority of law, public opinion, or evidence. But however the term is used, it always refers to a claim addressed to someone who, in some sense of the word, "must" respond. As a claim it differs from violence in that the person so addressed is not, strictly speaking, forced to respond. But as a claim it imposes, in some sense, some kind of an obligation to respond. This general notion will suffice as a basis for consideration of biblical authority.

The exercise of authority and/or the character of authoritativeness seem to fall into two broad classes. First, there is what might be called *unilateral and absolute authority* and, second, what might be called *dialogical and relative authority.* In the first class would be all exercises of authority that are finally coercive, covering a range from the quasi-violence of the command given by a lethally armed assailant to the self-evidence of a mathematical axiom. In such cases, to hear the address is to recognize the absolute necessity, for the sake of physical or intellectual self-preservation, of responding with compliance or assent or both.

In the second class, there are at least two instances worth exploring because both are illuminating in regard to the Bible. Dialogical authority characterizes situations in which the address is not coercive. What is said (in the broad, not strictly verbal, sense of this word) invites investigation of its claims, that is, verification of its truth claims and/or evaluation of its moral or behavioral claims.

First, there are the addresses to our mind by data that we constitute as evidence by conferring **evidential authority** upon them. When confronted by data the validity of whose claims is not self-evident we engage in all the forms of investigation necessary to decide whether those claims warrant assent or not. If and when we establish to our satisfaction that they do, we acknowledge the authority of the data, that is, we confer authority upon the data. For example, if we are trying to establish a critical text and come upon a document that is signed by the author, we do not immediately assume that it is an authentic autograph. But if, after the fullest and most minute evaluation possible, we establish beyond a reasonable doubt that the document is indeed an autograph, the document assumes an authority in regard to the textual tradition that is determinative for our critical work. In this case the datum approaches the kind of authority characteristic of self-evident truths. But it never quite attains such status, because it is always possible, no matter how remote the possibility, that new evidence will again cast doubt on the validity of the datum's truth claims.

It is the nature of all historical evidence, including that contained in the Bible, to be of this sort. In chapter 4 we will have more to say about the historical character of biblical material and its influence on interpretation, but here it is important to recognize that no matter how well established certain historical conclusions may be, they are never metaphysically or mathematically certain, because such certitude is not possible concerning contingent events. In relation to historical material, we are always involved in the process of conferring authority on data and recognizing the proportional and relative claims of such data.[31]

The second instance of dialogical authority that is important in relation to the Bible is what we might call **disclosive authority.** In this case, the address of authority never fully transcends its character as appeal. It never attains even relatively evidential status such that, if one wishes to reject the appeal, one must "disprove" its claims. In this category are such appeals as the claim of the beautiful to aesthetic response, the claim of a suffering human being to compassion, the claim of a parent to filial piety, the claim of the loving rebuke of a true friend to a hearing and even to a response of repentance and conversion, the claim of friendship to fidelity, the claim of one who has demonstrated his or her love to be believed. Such claims have in common that they call for a response that is not exclusively or even primarily intellectual but affective and moral.

These claims are certainly authoritative, but it is obvious that they are in no sense absolute or coercive. It is always possible to resist such a claim, and even if someone could force a response to it, the response would be vitiated by the very fact of being forced. But what is also characteristic of these claims is that though, on the one hand, they are never absolute or coercive, on the other hand, they are more compelling than those that are absolute. The reason is that the result of refusing to respond is not some kind of sanction such as physical violence, ignorance, or the diversion of one's research; it is the diminution of the self.

The difference between these two types of authority, namely, unilateral absolute authority and dialogical relative authority, might be characterized as the difference between the claim made by imposition and the claim made by "soft" evidence and/or by disclosure. In the first case the will of another or the evidence of the data imposes itself on the addressee. One must either respond appropriately or suffer the sanctions. In the second case something or someone is opened to us, and an invitation is issued to engage the reality so disclosed. To respond is to commit oneself, to be changed, to be initiated into a reality that one does not eventually dominate and control but in which one continues to participate at ever deeper levels.

Because of our natural human preference for certitude, we spontaneously tend to think that coercive, or at least evidential, authority is the primary analogue. Such is not the case. True personal authority is of the second type. This is the type of authority that God exercises toward humans. It is always difficult for us to understand that one who could compel assent and compliance deliberately chooses not to do so. But faith insists that such is the case.

The authority of scripture belongs, strictly speaking, to the second type of authority, that is, the dialogical. And, although there is much historical, theological, and literary material in the Bible that is proper subject matter for the types of analysis that establish or disestablish "soft" evidential authority in these areas, the religious/spiritual claims addressed to the individual reader/hearer and to the Church community by scripture as sacrament of the word of God is of the disclosive type, which never transcends its character as appeal. Thus, it never becomes a clear-cut, much less absolutely certain, propositional demand for intellectual assent. It remains a self-revelation of God, an invitation to a sharing of life, that is indeed demanding in the extreme but not as a series of dogmas or of commands.

From such a perspective the question of *normativity* (that is, scripture's status as a criterion or rule of faith) must be reenvisioned. Scripture is normative for theology, for the Church's faith commitment to the fostering of the reign of God in this world, and for the individual Christian's discipleship. But this normativity must be conceived in a much more holistic way than is possible when the scriptures are considered a kind of source book of dogmas, commandments, and prohibitions.

Scripture is normative for **theology** because it is a primary symbolic mediator (not the only one) of God's self-revelation. This self-revelation has all the complexity and ambiguity of any personal self-disclosure. Theology is not the business of describing accurately (not to mention exhaustively!) the nature, attributes, operations, and designs of God, which are finally unknowable to humans. It is a disciplined reflection on the Holy Mystery that attempts to say, in coherent ways, what (little) it can see, in the hope of guiding the vision of others. But if we recognize that we never come to a complete and definitive knowledge even of another human being with whom we have daily and intimate contact, that just when we think we really understand at least some characteristic of the person she or he says or does something that makes us realize we have not fully understood, surely we must acknowledge that the mystery of God so far transcends our relational capacities that our knowledge will never be exhaustive or even relatively commensurate with the mystery.

The notion that we can derive a comprehensive knowledge of the divinity from scripture is sheer hubris. However, scripture is normative of theological reflection in the sense that it is a primary source and locus of the experience of

God upon which theological reflection works, and that it acts as a negative check on that reflection.[32] But it only functions this way when the integral reality of scripture, including not only the text itself but also the tradition out of which the text comes and which it produces, is taken into account. This is extremely difficult to do, because God's self-revelation is characterized by such variety and diversity and even seeming self-contradiction that only a wide theological pluralism seems to afford some access to the knowledge of God that the Church seeks. We will return to this topic in chapter 6.

The scriptures are also normative for the **Church's mission** of announcing and fostering the reign of God in this world. The contemporary faith community, in trying to derive guidance from the Bible, especially from the gospels, on such complex and peculiarly modern questions as nuclear war, is making it very clear that the aphoristic approach to the Bible (not to mention more primitive prooftexting) is worse than useless. For example, for every text that seems to justify war, another can be adduced that seems to require the renunciation of war; a church that wants to take literally and absolutely the prohibition of divorce in Matthew 19:6 is hard put to justify not taking literally the clear injunction that bishops be married in 1 Timothy 3:2 when it is considering the question of mandatory celibacy for the clergy. The same problems attend the search for definitive biblical answers to innumerable other concrete modern questions.

The normativity of scripture in relation to the Church's overall mission is constituted by its presentation of the reign of God that Jesus preached. As biblical scholars and theologians have made us aware, the reign of God is not a static reality described in the Bible that we can understand comprehensively and then create in the world but a tensive metaphor that initiates us into a dynamic of divine-human relationship whose real consequences in individual and social life are never predetermined.[33] The only way we can learn what the reign of God means for our own times is by undertaking to live authentically in that dispensation and, from within that experience, reflecting on what that life invites us to realize in our world.[34]

Scripture is also normative for the faith life, including morality, of the **individual Christian.** But again, it is futile to try to derive from scripture dogmatic formulas or a list of specific ordinances to guide our responses in the concrete experiences of daily life. The monumental efforts of some people to establish "what the Bible says" about everything from the time of the final judgment to the legitimacy of Marian devotion or to "prove" from the Bible that specific human acts that are not already known from nonbiblical sources to be evil (such as murder) are always seriously sinful have regularly failed.[35] The commands of Jesus are not specific moral injunctions but the coordinates of a way of life whose particular realizations will vary enormously from person to person, culture to culture, and age to age. The Gospel command to love one another does not tell us specifically what to do in relation to military service, a failed marriage, the handling of criminals, or even our own sexuality. It invites us to a kind of life, to discipleship, that we must live with others who share this vocation, and in the process of so living we must discover what it means to follow Jesus. Some of our discoveries are indeed irreversible, such as the realization that slavery is so contrary to the meaning of Christian discipleship that it must be forever renounced (despite the acceptance of it in the New Testament [1 Tim. 6:1–2]). But others, such as those in the area of medical ethics, remain tentative. Some conclusions, in the course of time, will be seen as erroneous or no longer valid, such as the medieval prohibition of usury.

In short, the normativity of scripture must be understood in function of one's overall theology of scripture. If scripture is understood as a repository of divinely revealed true propositions and moral absolutes, then normativity will appear as an application of those propositions and absolutes, literally understood, to matters theological, missionary, and personal. If scripture is understood as the sacrament of divine revelation, of God's historical self-disclosure, then normativity will be understood as the ever-developing guiding influence on our thought and action of an ever-deepening familiarity with God in Jesus. For those seeking absolute norms for knowledge and behavior, the latter position will appear incoherent, unstable, and finally inadequate. For those who realize that the only God worth knowing is a personal God, and that all personal relationships are dialogical and relative, the "uncontrollability" of God's self-revelation is a source of joyful astonishment and an invitation to the unwavering confidence that only a God of endlessly original love can justify.

E. The Role of Faith in Biblical Interpretation

On the basis of these reflections on scripture as word of God, it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions about the role of faith in the interpretation of scripture, particularly of the New Testament. It should be evident that the answer one gives to the question of whether faith is necessary for, irrelevant to, or an impediment to valid interpretation depends directly on one's theology of scripture. It also depends on how one defines faith.

In the New Testament faith is not presented as a univocal notion. Jesus praised the faith of people who not only did not know who he was but who were not even Jews, that is, who did not share the monotheistic belief of Israel in the God revealed to the chosen people. In one case he said of a pagan, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Matt. 8:10). In another, he granted the petition of a Syro-Phoenician woman, saying to her, "O woman, great is your faith!" (Matt. 15:28). Faith, then, is not exclusively adherence to a revealed law. What it seems to mean in such cases is a fundamental openness of the person to transcendence. What people whose faith saved them seemed to have in common was their resistance to the primordial human temptation to make oneself the measure of the possible.[36] These people were willing to accept the possibility that something could exist, could act, that went beyond their own knowledge and powers. They were willing to appeal for help and to accept it from a source they did not understand or control.

Faith, in the New Testament, has another meaning that is more specific. It denotes the actualization of that openness to the transcendent by a specific acceptance of and adherence to Jesus and his teaching. This is full Christian faith, belief that Jesus is the one sent by God and that he has the words of eternal life. The fourth gospel offers perhaps the fullest treatment of this kind of faith (see, e.g., John 6:68–69; 11:25–27).

If scripture is regarded as the sacrament of divine revelation, it follows that the symbolic medium through which this revelation takes place is a fully human "free-standing" reality. Just as one who did a laboratory analysis of the eucharistic bread would find real—and only—bread, so the Bible is really a human text that can be analyzed and understood as such without reference to the transcendent reality that it mediates. It is the nature of symbolic revelation that the symbolic medium is not denatured or turned into some insubstantial veil of appearances. It retains its full reality and as such can be analyzed and understood. This is precisely why symbolic revelation, although it makes a believing response objectively possible, never necessitates such a response. Consequently, the Bible can be studied and understood as a human text without believing in the God whom Christians claim this text mediates. However, one cannot abstract from the truth claims of the text as text. And in the case of the New Testament these claims bear upon the person and message of Jesus.

If faith is understood as fundamental, nonthematized openness to the transcendent, then faith is necessary for any adequate interpretation of the Bible, because this text's truth claims bear upon religious reality, that is, the transcendent. One who approaches this text with an a priori and nonnegotiable conviction that no such claims can be taken seriously because they are without exception false cannot validly interpret this text, not because one must share Christian faith to do so, but because all interpretation of human texts, and especially of classics, demands that their truth claims be loyally engaged even if such engagement leads eventually to the establishment of their falsity.[37] What is being said here about the non-Christian interpreter of the Bible would hold just as well for a Christian undertaking to interpret the Koran or the Bhagavad Gita or any other religious classic.

If faith is understood as personal adherence to Jesus as the Christ and acceptance of his teaching as the word of life, faith would not be necessary for a valid interpretation of the text as text but only for an interpretation of the text as symbolic revelation, that is, as sacred scripture. The evident reason for this is that one cannot experience the Bible as scripture unless one can perceive in the text the very particular self-disclosure of God that is the content and form of Christian faith. That perception might be initially evoked even in the non-Christian and/or nonreligious "secular" reader. But only one whose spiritual sensibility has been formed and educated by life in the Christian community, whose intelligence has been enlightened by the faith of that community, whose affectivity is enlivened by the experience of God's love in Christ can hear integrally what the text *as scripture* is saying.

In summary, against the background of a theology of scripture as symbolic revelation, that is, as sacrament of the Word of God, the answer to the question about the relationship of faith to interpretation is twofold. Faith as a fundamental openness to the religious truth claims of the text is a requirement for even minimally valid interpretation of the text as *text;* faith as thematic Christian commitment is necessary for interpretation of the Bible as *scripture.* Obviously, if one holds that this text *is* scripture, then an adequate interpretation, one that takes full account of the text in terms of its own nature and purpose, requires its interpretation *as* scripture.

In other words, a true and adequate hermeneutical theory must finally embrace the whole reality of the object to be interpreted. From one point of view, the biblical text is a human text, and one can develop a hermeneutical theory that will ground its interpretation as a human text. Such a theory would be substantially identical with the hermeneutical theory developed for the interpretation of any classical religious text. From another point of view, the one adopted in this study, this text is sacred scripture, and an adequate hermeneutical theory is one that takes full account of the Bible's reality as a human text that is a privileged mediation of the divine-human encounter. This amounts to a claim that biblical hermeneutics as such (that is, as a theory of interpretation of the Bible as scripture) encompasses the general canons of interpretation but is not simply identical with them, because the object of interpretation governs the theory of interpretation, and in the case of the Bible there is more here than a text. One is engaged with the revelatory text.

Notes

1. On this point, see the essay of Paul Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work,* ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), pp. 120–133.
2. The most comprehensive recent study of metaphor, making use of virtually all the recent work in this field, is Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language,* trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). A brief summary exposition can be found in *IT,* pp. 45–69.

   For a compact but lucid presentation of contemporary theory on metaphor, see Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 32–42. McFague supplies extensive bibliography on metaphor, including virtually all the major works on the subject influencing biblical scholars today.

   Among contemporary biblical scholars who have emphasized the relevance of new understandings of metaphor for New Testament interpretation are George Caird, John Dominic Crossan, John Donahue, Robert Funk, Norman Perrin, Phyllis Trible, and Amos Wilder. I am indebted to these authors, esp. to McFague and Ricoeur, for the material on metaphor in this chapter.

3. See Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 78–87, 97–123.
4. *IT,* pp. 49–51.
5. The reader will note that even this supposedly "literal" sentence is filled with metaphor: tension, death, etc. Human language is so pervasively metaphorical that it is actually harder to speak "literally" than to speak metaphorically.
6. See *IT,* p. 64, for a brief explanation of the concept of root metaphor. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology,* pp. 108–111, explains how root metaphors function in theology.
7. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology,* pp. 108–111.
8. A major exposition of this theory of language in relation to scripture and interpretation is Gerhard Ebeling's essay, "Word of God and Hermeneutic," in *The New Hermeneutic,* vol. 2 of *New Frontiers in Theology: Discussions Among Continental and American Theologians,* ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 78–110. This famous essay was originally presented as an address in 1959.
9. Michael Cook, in *The Jesus of Faith: A Study in Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1981), pp. 192–195, follows Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), on this important point.
10. The theory of symbol that I develop here owes much to the following authors: Gilbert Durand, *L'imagination symbolique,* 2d ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968); Thomas Fawcett, *The Symbolic Language of Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977); *IT,* pp. 53–69; Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* vol. 10 of *World Perspectives,* ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 41–54.
11. See *TM,* pp. 153–155, on the distinction between sign and symbol.
12. *DV* VI:21.
13. *TM,* pp. 94–100, and the whole of chapter 2, "The Ontology of the Work of Art and Its Hermeneutic Significance," pp. 101–169. An even more thought-provoking development of this same point as it applies to scripture is found in Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1979), pp. 256–264.
14. A major work that summarizes and analyzes Roman Catholic theology of revelation up to Vatican II is René Loutourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966).
15. Treatises on revelation are historically a fairly recent phenomenon, dating back only to the Enlightenment. However, some implicit understanding of revelation necessarily underlies every theological position.
16. An excellent entry into this subject is provided by Avery Dulles in *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983).
17. For a succinct overview of the history of this question, see Raymond F. Collins, "Inspiration," *NJBC* 65:8–53.
18. For a more complete discussion of the effects on Christian theology and spirituality of the early Church's need to resituate itself in regard to the scriptures of Israel, see my article "Scripture and Spirituality," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century,* vol. 16 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest,* ed. B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985): 1–20.
19. See Raymond E. Brown and Raymond F. Collins, "Canonicity," *NJBC* 66:48–86, on the formation of the New Testament canon; Raymond E. Brown, Pheme Perkins, and Anthony J. Saldarini, "Apocrypha; Dead Sea Scrolls; Other Jewish Literature," *NJBC* 67:53–77, on early Christian noncanonical literature.
20. See John Goldingay, "Inspiration," *DBI:* 314–316, for further details on the history of the theology of inspiration.
21. For a brief historical overview of both Catholic and Protestant developments, see Robert Gnuse, "Authority of the Scriptures: Quest for a Norm," *BTB* 13 (April 1983): 59–66. This article contains an excellent selective bibliography on the topic. See also Gnuse's *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture* (New York: Paulist, 1985) and its extensive bibliography.
22. Karl Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible,* 2d rev. ed., vol. 1 of *Quaestiones Disputatae,* trans. C. Henkey (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964).
23. Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

24. For a succinct and critical summary of theories of "social inspiration," see the chapter of that title in Gnuse, *Authority of the Bible,* pp. 50–62.
25. *DV* 3:11.
26. The theory that Thomas A. Hoffman proposed in "Inspiration, Normativeness, Canonicity, and the Unique Sacred Character of the Bible," *CBQ* 44 (July 1982): 447–469, is, in my opinion, one of the better attempts in this direction.
27. By "complete" I obviously do not mean adequate from a theological point of view but that the man Jesus was empirically available as a historical phenomenon and could be understood just as any other human being can. Someone who understood him in this way would not necessarily be aware of having overlooked something constitutive of him.
28. This is the theory developed by Achtemeier in *Inspiration of Scripture* (see, esp., pp. 124–136), which is the most coherent I have discovered.
29. See James T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), for detailed discussion of some of these approaches among Catholic thinkers. See James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) and *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), for Protestant positions.
30. Cf. Achtemeier, *Inspiration of Scripture,* pp. 73–75; Collins, "Inspiration," *NJBC* 65:50–51.
31. See the excellent treatment of the nature of historical knowledge, especially in relation to biblical material and the claims of faith, by Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), esp. chapters 1–3.
32. Catholic theologians of the Conciliar era, e.g., Anne Carr, Yves Congar, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Gustavo Gutierrez, Elizabeth Johnson, Hans Küng, Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Rosemary R. Ruether, and Edward Schillebeeckx have stressed the originating role of religious experience for theological reflection. In this respect contemporary theologians differ significantly from the manual dogmatists of the Tridentine era, whose theology tended to be deduced from doctrine rather than to arise from experience. See Regina Bechtle, "Theological Trends: Convergences in Theology and Spirituality," *The Way* 25 (October 1985): 305–314, for a development of this point.
33. Norman Perrin, in *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), was building on the work of Amos N. Wilder, in *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), in his very important development of the argument that "Kingdom of God" is not a concept but a symbol, not a steno-symbol but a tensive symbol. McFague, in *Metaphorical Theology,* pp. 108–111, describes "Kingdom of Heaven" as a root metaphor of Christian revelation.
34. This is the import of the role assigned to praxis by liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez (see, e.g., "Theology: A Critical Reflection," in *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973, 1978], 3–12), and feminists such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (see, e.g., "The Function of Scripture in the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics and Liberation Theology," in *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Boston: Beacon, 1984], 43–63). Adrian Hastings offers an excellent, succinct treatment of this subject in "Theology and Praxis," in *The Theology of a Protestant Catholic* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), 166–170.
35. Contemporary debates, especially within the Catholic church, over such moral issues as masturbation, homosexuality, and contraception and, in the wider Church, over abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment demonstrate the futility of attempting to derive specific moral solutions from particular biblical texts or even combinations of texts.
36. I developed this notion in respect to faith in the fourth gospel in "Reflections on Commitment in the Gospel According to John," *BTB* 8 (February 1978): 40–48.
37. This is precisely the point of Gadamer's opposing of truth to method. See, esp., *TM,* pp. 362–379.

3

The New Testament as the Church's Book

A. The Meaning of the Claim

One of the earliest and most consistent claims that the Church has made about the Bible as a whole and the New Testament in particular is that the Bible is the Church's book and as such can only be properly and authentically interpreted by the Church. In this third and final chapter of Part I, this claim must be investigated both to understand what it does (and does not) mean and to see how this special relationship (whatever it is) affects the work of New Testament interpretation.

The claim that the Bible is the Church's book is not primarily a claim of "ownership." If it were it would be largely meaningless, since any ancient published text is universally regarded as being in the public domain. Furthermore, for those who regard this book as word of God it would be more than a little arrogant (not to mention contrary to the Gospel itself) to claim that it is the "property" of any particular group in the human family. The claim bears primarily on the reciprocal relationship of Church and Bible in the work of interpretation. The Church claims to be the authentic interpreter of the text and to be, as a community, normatively interpreted by the text.[1] This does not mean (as Tertullian tried to maintain)[2] that non-Christians cannot validly interpret the text, even perhaps arrive at very important insights into its meaning that have not surfaced in the Church. And it certainly does not mean that a non-Christian interpreter who takes seriously the truth claims of the text will not be salvifically challenged by it. But it does mean that the most adequate context for the emergence of the full and integral meaning of the Bible, the authoritative voice in conflicts of interpretation, and the Bible's primary addressee is the Church, that is, the community of the disciples of Jesus who have been baptized into his paschal mystery and filled with his Spirit and who live faithfully as his body in this world.

The basis of this claim is not that the Bible was written by members of the early Church, something that is, in any case, not true of the Old Testament. Furthermore, many documents emerged from the early Church, some of which are held in very high regard down to our own time (e.g., the *Didache*), for which the Church makes no such claim. The real basis for the Church's claim that the Bible is its own book is the **integral and living relationship between the Bible and tradition as constituting, together, the locus of Gospel revelation.** We have already inquired into the relationship between the New Testament and revelation. We must now examine the notion of tradition in order to see, first, what it means and how it is related to revelation and, second, how scripture and tradition are related to each other.

For two reasons, I do not propose to treat, even in summary fashion, the history of theological reflection and speculation on the topic of tradition. First, excellent critical histories of the theological discussions of this subject are readily available.[3] Second, most of the modern (that is, post-Tridentine) discussion of tradition in general and the relationship of scripture and tradition in particular is concerned with the debate over whether there is one source of revelation (scripture) or two sources (scripture and tradition). The former position, defended as the very touchstone of the Protestant Reform, and the latter, defended as the distinguishing post-Tridentine Roman Catholic position, were hardened in the polemical atmosphere of the Counter-Reformation into caricatures of the values each sought to protect. In the last two decades this polemic has been largely abandoned. Protestants have rediscovered the importance, indeed indispensability, of tradition, and Catholics, under the explicit guidance of Vatican II,[4] have abandoned the "two source" theory of revelation in favor of the reaffirmation that Jesus the Christ, in both word and work, is the unique source of revelation and the Bible, especially the New Testament, is the normative witness in the Church to that revelation.[5] The discussion, then, has been completely resituated and its contours redrawn as all member denominations in the Church have come to a more integral understanding of tradition as being not primarily or exclusively historically developed dogmas or usages but the entire process of handing on the faith through successive generations. At the same time all have become conscious of the privileged and even normative position of scripture, especially the New Testament, in the process of articulating the faith of the Church.[6]

What follows will be reflection done not from the side of theology attempting to define, criticize, or defend juridical or dogmatic understandings of tradition but from the side of biblical studies trying to understand the reciprocal relationship between scripture and tradition in the actualization of revelation in the Church. My concern is not to defend the role of tradition (which I consider self-evident because of the very nature of interpretation of foundational documents) but to understand how it functions in interpretation (which is not at all self-evident). Throughout this exploration I will make use of an analogy developed at length by

Hans-Georg Gadamer[7] and recently exploited by Linnell Cady in relation to theology.[8] It is the singularly enlightening analogy between legal hermeneutics in relation to the foundational documents of a civil society and biblical hermeneutics in relation to the foundational texts of Christianity.

In general, what the analogy clarifies is the reciprocal relationship between foundational community experience and the written formulation of the community's self-understanding. The experience of the group that founds a society precedes its formulation of the fundamental law of the society. But after the formulation and commitment to writing of this fundamental law (which includes the basic vision, values, and essential beliefs of the founding members of the community), the society and its experience become subject to the foundational vision and experience as preserved in the written documents of foundation. This subjection, however, can never be absolute. As the community moves forward in history, the fundamental law must be constantly reinterpreted if it is not to become a musty relic either totally irrelevant to ongoing life or rigidly obstructive of the very societal experience it was formulated to promote. The ongoing interpretation by means of which the foundational documents of a society are kept alive in interaction with the experience of the community is the work of the entire community. But if the community is larger than a few people and at all diverse, some members of this community must be chosen as special (though not independent or unique) agents of that community task.[9]

Finally, the ongoing interpretation itself comes to constitute a normative body of community experience that is rendered relatively permanent in various ways and that functions with the foundational documents in the successive moments of interpretation. For two reasons, the historical experience of the United States is an excellent concrete example of this entire process. First, because the foundation of the nation is so recent its early history is easily accessible. Second, because it was from the very beginning a literate culture, the interaction between lived tradition and written formulations is verified throughout its history. We will have occasion to return to this analogy several times.

B. The Meaning of Tradition and Its Relation to the New Testament

At this point it is necessary to set some rather restrictive boundaries to our inquiry. The question of the relation of scripture to tradition involves at least five major topics, each of which is vast enough to require a chapter of its own. First, there is the question of the relation of Israel's tradition to the scriptures it produced (for Christians, the Old Testament); second, the relationship of Jesus and his earliest disciples to the Jewish scriptures; third, the relation of the early Church to the scriptures it produced (the Christian New Testament); fourth, the relation the Church strove to establish between the Jewish scriptures and the scriptures it had produced (through such procedures as typological and allegorical interpretation); fifth, the relationship between the Church and the whole of *its*

Bible, that is, the Old Testament (now no longer regarded as the Jewish scriptures but as the first part of a new entity) and the New Testament considered together as a single canon within which the New Testament was normative for the interpretation of the Old Testament.

Because of the focus of this study on the interpretation of the New Testament, we will limit our considerations in this chapter to the third and, to some extent, the fifth of these topics. In other words, we will be inquiring primarily into the reciprocal relationship between the Church and the New Testament, which includes both the *production* of the New Testament by the Church and the Church's experience of being the *subject of New Testament interpretation*, that is, both its interpreter and that which is interpreted by it. Much of what will be said would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the relationship between the Church and the Christian Bible as a whole (i.e., both Testaments), but this will not be the focus of attention, and no attempt will be made to introduce the reservations and qualifications that would be necessary to do justice to the larger topic.

1. Tradition and the Historical Consciousness of the Church

Since the nineteenth century our understanding of history has undergone radical change, and this necessarily affects our understanding of tradition. The philosophical roots of the change are deeply embedded in the Enlightenment's rejection of unexamined dogmatic authority and its turn to criticism as the norm of reason. It passes by way of the reflections of Martin Heidegger on the historicality of the human existent and the inadequacy of the positivist subject-object paradigm of human understanding. Gadamer pursued these insights in the development of his conception of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* or "effective historical consciousness."[10]

Contemporary historical theory has definitively undermined the conception of history as a stable and fixed reality that the detached and uninvolved human observer can objectify and describe. The precontemporary image of the historian was that of a serene observer sitting on an eminent peak looking back on the now immobile and definitively constituted landscape of the past, or at its most dynamic, watching the stream of history flow past far below. Contemporary philosophers of human nature and of history have impressed upon us that we, as subjects, are historical microsystems carried by and participating in an historical macrosystem (itself multisystemed) from which we are distinguished by a thoroughly permeable boundary. We are **never "outside" history but always participants in it.** And we do not participate as stable or fixed essences but as ever-changing historical entities.

By way of concrete example, we not only look back on our youth differently from the vantage point of middle age than we did from that of early adulthood but our youth itself is actually different in some ways because of its ever-changing relationship with an expanded subjectivity (the change in the microsystem) and an expanded world horizon (the change in the macrosystem). It is not just that we see differently something that is actually the same but that our past, as part of the changing reality that is our historicality, is actually different because of its new relationships. We have all had the experience of realizing, in the light of subsequent experience, that something we experienced as a tragedy when it happened was really a great grace in our life. The sense in which the event "does not change," namely, materially or in its facticity, is insignificant in comparison with the very real sense in which it is transformed, namely, historically or in its meaning. In fact, it is not even really correct to say that it has not changed materially, because what we experienced in the past did not, at the time, have the character it now actually has. It is not the case that we simply did not see its true character. Had we died just after its occurrence it would not have been what, in fact, it has become. It is our awareness of this incessantly dynamic character of human experience in interaction with all of historical reality, which is equally dynamic, that constitutes historical consciousness.

But what Gadamer has further illuminated for us is the **effectiveness** of this entire dynamism within our consciousness, the way in which it influences all of our ongoing experience but especially our knowing processes. For example, there is a real difference, due to effective historical consciousness, between a naive precritical literalism in biblical interpretation and postcritical fundamentalism, even though they might both defend the historical facticity of the story of Jonah and the sea monster. Pre-Enlightenment naive literalists enjoyed an immediacy with the subject matter of the text that is no longer possible, no matter how committed to the historical inerrancy of the text one might be. If pre-Enlightenment readers, living in a world where historical divine intervention in human affairs was taken for granted, encountered the story of Jonah being swallowed by a sea monster, they would not necessarily experience any difficulty in accepting this. If God wanted Jonah transported to Nineveh within the digestive tract of a fish, God could certainly bring this about. And, in fact, what the text assures the reader is that this is precisely what happened. Twentieth-century fundamentalists, however, who want to take this passage literally have to do so in spite of all the advances in marine and human biology, in literary theory, in theology, and in historical knowledge that conspire to make this story incredible as an actual historical account. No matter how committed to the verbal inerrancy of scripture contemporary fundamentalists might be, they must situate themselves in relationship to these intellectual developments, even if that consists in denying their validity or their relevance in religious matters. In other words, historical consciousness in a twentieth-century person is characterized by its participation in the post-Enlightenment critical mentality. This participation is effective, that is, it influences all conscious experience. Even if one denies the necessity or validity of criticism in some area, one cannot *not* take its demands into account.

Our evolved appreciation of our own historicity and of the effectiveness of historical consciousness in our experience reveals the inadequacy of a conception of tradition as a fixed body of dogmatic propositions. In fact, this dogmatic conception of tradition developed out of the polemics of the Counter-Reformation when the Roman church felt compelled to defend tradition as a source of revelation distinct and separate from scripture against the Protestant principle of *scriptura sola.* The notion of tradition common in the pre-Tridentine Church was much more inclusive and dynamic. It was this richer pre-Reformation notion that was reappropriated, clarified, and developed in the Second Vatican Council's treatment of revelation and that we must build on in developing an approach to the relationship between scripture and tradition that will make sense of the claim that the Church is the subject (in the double sense of agent and object) of the interpretation of scripture.

However, we cannot be content to simply revive an ancient notion of tradition because tradition has to do with history. As we have just noted, our conception and experience of history is very different from that of our pre-Enlightenment forebears. What we can learn from them is their appreciation of the fact that tradition is concerned not just with the propositional formulation of the faith, whether in creeds or dogmatic statements, but with the entire life of the Church, with its liturgy and spirituality, its community life and self-consciousness, its history of persecution and survival, its missionary endeavors, its speculative theological developments, its customs and usages, and even its administrative arrangements. Furthermore, they also realized what the contemporary Church has so recently recovered, namely, that tradition was handed over not only by formal inculcation of faith propositions but by initiation, celebration, prayer, apprenticeship, exhortation, and imitation. In short, a renewed appreciation of the pre-Reformation understanding of tradition can broaden our understanding of both the content and the mode of tradition, but it must be supplemented by a contemporary understanding of history and historical consciousness if we are to arrive at a fully revitalized conception of tradition.

The most significant difference between the positivist conceptions of history characteristic of the nineteenth century and our own is that the former conceived of history as a collection of fixed contents, established in former times, that could be delivered cognitively to the present as they existed in the past. In fact, the past exists only as and insofar as it constitutes the present, in other words, as it affects historical consciousness and, through that consciousness, the ongoing historical process. Tradition is, precisely, one of the ways in which the past is made actual and effective.

All of the past of a person or a group is potentially effectively present. Depth psychology tends to suggest that, at least in the case of individuals, it is actually present in some way in the personal unconscious. Even that which has been "forgotten" or repressed or was never noticed is somehow at work, however hiddenly, in a person's psychic experience. Whether that is the case or not, it is certainly the case that much of the past is effective in the present as conscious memory, habit, healed or unhealed trauma, inherited and learned characteristics, acquired knowledge, and in many other forms. A nation's foundational struggles, civil strife, experiences of prosperity, moments of glory, defeats and humiliations, and everything else that constitutes its history is somehow influential in its ongoing life as elements of its identity and influences on its self-understanding and modes of operation.[11] In short, the history of an individual or a community includes the entirety of its experience as that experience influences and shapes its ongoing life.

When we speak of tradition, however, we are not speaking of history as a whole. Tradition includes the notion of "handing on," that is, of selection, interpretation, valuing, appropriation, and deliberate transmission to future members of the particular group with which the individual or community is involved. Not everything in the history of a person or a community is, or becomes, tradition, but all of tradition belongs to the particular history of the individual or group.[12]

The process of tradition is more easily observed in the case of an individual or a small community like a family. The process of selection, of deciding what one wants to pass on to future generations, may be a single conscious process such as is carried on by the person who writes his or her memoirs or autobiography or a last letter to descendants. It can also be more spontaneous and episodic, such as the gradual elaboration of particular feasts or the formation of a body of stories that carry the beliefs, values, fears, and hopes of the group or the development of certain customs or ways of proceeding in regard to significant dimensions of communal experience. The point is that out of all of the experience of the individual or community certain events, persons, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and the like are selected because of the value that they have for the ongoing life of the present and future generations. These traditions are consciously appropriated, that is, stabilized in meaning and form so that they can be repeatedly returned to and reactualized. They are deliberately transmitted by narration, celebration, explanation, inculcation, repetition, and all the other ways human beings have developed for carrying past experience into the present and enabling those who were not present when the experience occurred to make that experience their own.

Contemporary philosophy has made us particularly aware of the role of language in the process of tradition. Language, including both the actual spoken and written phenomenon and the numerous other forms of intelligible communication, such as signs, gestures, rituals, art, and the like, is the medium that makes experience intersubjective and carries it forward.[13] The process of appropriation of experience is a process of "languaging" it and, by means of language, integrating it with the rest of our experience. Through shared language we can express our appropriated experience, including its meaning, and another can enter into it, thus affecting the ongoing experience of both speaker and hearer. By fixation in language through memorization, writing, or ritual, experience can be saved from disappearance into the mists of time and reactualized for later generations. Ray Hart, with characteristic vividness, has called the dogmatic tradition of the Church the "linguistic debris" of the houses of meaning in which past generations of believers dwelt.[14] This debris (which includes much more than the dogmatic tradition) becomes the raw material for the construction of new houses of meaning in which contemporary believers can dwell.

Although language must be understood broadly to include the entire process of intelligible communication, it remains true that the paradigmatic instance of language is the spoken and written use of verbal systems. Consequently, when we speak of the tradition of the Church, it is not surprising that there is a natural tendency to think of it as consisting primarily in a collection of texts recording the teachings in which the Church has formulated its beliefs. But the whole point of the foregoing considerations is that such a conception of tradition is far too narrow and static.

Let us now summarize the notion of tradition we will be using in trying to understand the tradition of the Church in relation to the New Testament. Tradition is the actualization in the present, in and through language, of the most valued and critically important aspects of the community's experience, or, more precisely, of the community's experience itself as it has been selectively appropriated and deliberately transmitted. Tradition is the primary form and norm of effective historical consciousness, which is the medium of ongoing community experience. It includes deliberately formulated belief, that is, dogma, but is by no means limited to dogma. It includes liturgy, spirituality, the lives and teachings of exemplary believers, historical experiences, legislation, artistic creations, customs, and much more.

One of the tasks of each generation of believers is to appropriate the tradition, to enrich and purify it by living interaction with it, and to transmit it to the next generation. However, that task was radically altered by the birth of the critical mentality. Prior to the Enlightenment and the intellectual Weltanschauung to which it gave birth, the encounter between the believer and the tradition enjoyed an immediacy that is no longer possible. Postcritical appropriation of tradition must pass by way of critical distanciation. This is not necessarily an impoverishment. Indeed, as we will see in chapter 5, it can be the means of significant enrichment.[15] But it will be so only if the traditioning process and its interaction with scripture is reconceived in terms of contemporary historical consciousness.

2. Tradition as Foundation, Content, and Mode of the Church's Effective Historical Consciousness

Because the word *tradition* as it has been used in theological discourse is so notoriously fluid, it is seldom noticed that it really encompasses three distinct, though not separate, meanings. In this section I want to raise to the level of explicit consciousness each of these three meanings so that the full significance of tradition will be available when we consider the role of tradition in the interpretation of the New Testament. Tradition, as the **foundational gift** out of which the Church's experience unfolds throughout history, is the Holy Spirit who is the presence of the risen Jesus making the Church the Body of Christ. Tradition, as **content,** is the sum total of appropriated and transmitted Christian experience, out of which Christians throughout history select the material for renewed syntheses of the faith. Tradition refers also to the **mode** by which that content is made available to successive generations of believers, the way in which the traditioning of the faith is carried on throughout history.

a. Foundation

At the center of the Church's self-consciousness as Church is its experienced oneness with the risen Jesus who is Christ and Lord, that is, the eschatological fulfillment of Israel's hope for salvation and the human presence of the Holy Mystery in our midst. As the historical Jesus was revelation incarnate, the symbolic presence of God in the world, so the Church experiences itself as the Body of Christ, the symbolic presence of the risen Jesus in subsequent history. Integral to and foundational for the identity of Jesus and that of the Church is the indwelling Spirit of God in whom Jesus experienced his oneness with God (thus making his being and work revelatory) and the Church experiences its oneness with Jesus (thus making it the Body of Christ acting salvifically in the world). As the Spirit constitutes the unity of Jesus with God, so the Spirit is the unity between Jesus and the Church. The indwelling Spirit as constitutive of the Church's identity with Christ was bestowed by Jesus in the context of his paschal mystery.

The giving of this gift is recounted in various ways in the New Testament: as the act of the crucified Jesus at the moment of his glorification on the cross (John 19:30), as the act of the resurrected Lord (John 20:22) commissioning his disciples for the continuation of his mission in the world, as the spectacular fulfillment of the promise of the ascending Lord (Luke 24:49 in relation to Acts 2), as the experience of each person called to membership in the community of the risen Savior (e.g., Acts 10:44–48). It is clear from each of these passages that the Spirit is given directly by the glorified Christ to his disciples. But the most interesting recounting of this gift, for our purposes, is John 19:30: "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is consummated' [*tetelestai*]; and he bowed his head and *handed over* [*paredōken*] his spirit" (my translation and emphasis). There follows immediately the opening of the side of the glorified Lord and the symbolic outflow of blood and water to which the evangelist solemnly testifies (John 19:34–35).

Tradition, therefore, in the foundational sense of the word, is the Holy Spirit that Jesus "handed over" (from the Latin *tradere,* meaning to hand over and to hand down) to his disciples when he had fully achieved the salvific work that his Father had sent him to do. The Spirit is all that Jesus has from God, all that he has received from his Father, all that he wants to bequeath to his followers. If Jesus is revelation, that is, the Word of God incarnate in history, Tradition is the Spirit of Jesus, that is, his active presence embodied in the Church.

We find in the Last Discourses (chapters 14–17) in John's gospel a description of this foundational gift that makes clear the relationship of the Spirit to the historical consciousness of the Church. The Spirit is to abide forever with and within the disciples (John 14:16), continually actualizing within them the presence and life of Jesus: The Spirit "will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). But the shape or form of this indwelling presence and activity is described in specifically historical terms: the Spirit will ensure that the disciples *remember* all that Jesus has said to them (John 14:26) and will *lead* them into that fullness of truth that the first disciples were not yet able to bear (John 16:12–13). The Spirit is the ever-actual presence of Jesus bringing forward the past to enlighten and be enlightened by the present in terms of the future.

It is important to note that the Spirit handed over is given to each disciple. According to Peter (Acts 2:14–21), Joel's prophecy (2:28–32) that in messianic times the Spirit would be poured out not just on chosen representatives of the people but on every son and daughter, on the young and the old, on slaves and free alike is fulfilled in the Pentecostal gift. The gradual development in the Old Testament from an almost exclusively corporate sense of salvation toward a full recognition of the significance of the individual person that grounds a truly personal/corporate community in the New Testament comes to completion in the experience of the gift of the Spirit not to a group as group, or solely to community representatives who then mediate it as they choose, but to each disciple of the Lord. The Spirit appeared as separate tongues of flame settling upon each of those gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2:3). No one owns or controls the Spirit whom Jesus gives to whomever he wills (Acts 10:47–48). And down through the history of the Church the rites of initiation, administered individually to each new believer, constitute a recognition and confirmation of the gift of the Spirit to the individual by Jesus himself. The Spirit's indwelling grounds the union of the members of Christ who corporately constitute his presence in the world.

Although every treatment of tradition in the Church assumes the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the Church's life, the sense in which the Spirit, given to and indwelling each of the baptized, constitutes Tradition (that which is "handed over") as its foundation, guarantee, and ever-active principle is sometimes left implicit. Attention to this most fundamental meaning of tradition becomes more important in proportion as we recognize the rich diversity in the content and mode of tradition and attempt to revalorize the active participation of the entire People of God in the development, interpretation, and transmission of tradition.[16] In what follows I will designate tradition in this foundational sense, namely, the Holy Spirit as given or handed over, by spelling Tradition with a capital letter. Lowercase will be reserved for all other meanings of the word.

b. Content

If Tradition in the foundational and primary sense of the word is the Holy Spirit given to each of the disciples of Jesus who are thereby constituted his corporate presence in the world, tradition in the most commonly understood sense refers to the content of its historical consciousness that the living Church transmits from generation to generation. The historical consciousness of the Church is constituted by the interaction between the Spirit-animated Church and the existential situations in which the Church lives. Just as the tradition in a family is not just what the parents have handed over to the children (values, customs, commitments, etc.) but what becomes of that heritage as the children live it and hand it on to their children, so the tradition of the Church is not an inert treasure but a living experience that transforms and is transformed by the believers in whom it is carried. What the Spirit brings to our minds is the history and teaching of Jesus mediated through the centuries of Christian living. But it is not a purely speculative or reproductive knowledge. It is a remembrance that calls for a new understanding in the light of new circumstances, an understanding that will reveal new depths that we, as Church, were not able to understand or to bear in former times.

As the Church lives the mystery of Christ in each age, it reshapes that mystery, deemphasizes certain aspects, develops others, selects from its own past experience of the mystery that which must be handed on, appropriates it in new ways, and develops suitable forms for transmitting it. All of this traditioning is done as a living of the Spirit-life, and so its continuity with the living of previous generations of Christians and with the life and mission of Jesus is grounded and guaranteed. However, just as the humanity of Jesus was not a mere appearance, so the humanity of the Church is not suspended or denatured by the indwelling Spirit. The historical experience of the Church is profoundly human and, as such, limited, relative, and liable to mistake and misstep. The presence of the Spirit does not guarantee that no serious errors will be made in the development or handing on of tradition. It guarantees that the fundamental unity between Christ and his body cannot be broken and that the salvific mission of the Church will not be ultimately subverted.

However, just as the mission of Jesus was accomplished in ways we would never have recognized as divine, so the mission of the Church often passes through the detours, byways, and back alleys of human error and evil. Theologians have sometimes tried to express this divine-human tension in the Church's experience as the relation between Tradition and tradition. But Tradition with a capital letter has often been equated with dogma considered as definitively acquired, irreformably formulated, and officially taught, whereas tradition(s) is the material history of the Church from which this dogmatic residue is crystallized. Besides creating the unfortunate impression that tradition in the strict sense of the word is restricted to dogma, this approach embodies the kind of substantialist approach to history of which I have tried to demonstrate the inadequacy.[17]

The presence and action of the Holy Spirit informing the interaction between the Church and the whole of history is both creative and critical. It is as much the work of the Spirit to guide the Church's self-criticism and incessant purification as to guide its ever-deepening appropriation of the riches of Christ. Both processes belong to the development of tradition. Both are the work of the Spirit preserving, developing, and transmitting the presence and mission of the glorified Lord.

Having recognized, however, the fully human and always relative character of church tradition, it is necessary to distinguish between two moments of the living tradition that are not qualitatively the same, namely, the *apostolic tradition* and the *ongoing tradition* that will inform and guide, as effective historical consciousness, the life of the Church until the end of time. The foundational period of the Church's life is difficult to delineate temporally with exactitude. We cannot literally equate it with the period ending with the death of the last apostle, because, not only do we not know exactly who qualified as an apostle or when the "last" one died,[18] but also it is fairly certain that the composition of the New Testament, which must certainly be included in the foundational experience, was completed by people who postdated the apostles (whoever they were) in time.[19] For the moment, we will designate as the foundational period that original period during which the first generations of disciples appropriated the Christ-event sufficiently to compose and recognize as an adequate and definitive self-expression the apostolic literature that eventually became the New Testament canon.

To appreciate the normative character of apostolic tradition in both its written and unwritten forms as well as the relationship between these forms, we must make explicit and reject certain naive assumptions that often function even in rather sophisticated treatments of tradition. First, it is not the case that the singular importance and normative character of apostolic tradition arise from the proximity in time of the first generations to the historical Jesus. Second, it is not the case that the importance of apostolic tradition derives from its being the fullest, truest, and best expression of Christian revelation.

If either of these assumptions were true, the logic of the position would entail the assertion that subsequent Christian experience has been a continuous diminution of the original event tending toward its eventual "petering out" at some point in the future. Quite the contrary is the case. The depths and richness of the revelation of God in Christ is being slowly brought into actuality by the interaction of the Christ-event, carried forward in tradition, with the ever-expanding and deepening human experience in history. Surely we have a much wider and more profound appreciation of the meaning of Christ for human history two thousand years after his coming than did the first generation of Christians, who did not even know of the existence of that part of the world in which Christianity would eventually be most influential. Furthermore, there is little doubt that we understand Jesus himself, his mission, his paschal mystery, and the nature and task of his Church, much better than his first disciples could have understood these matters. In short, the Christ-event is not a radio signal that is strongest at the point of transmission and gets weaker as it gets geographically and chronologically farther from the tower.

As has been mentioned a number of times, revelation is not constituted uniquely by the divine initiative in self-giving. The reception of the gift by those to whom it is offered, empowering a reciprocal self-gift, is constitutive of revelation itself. Consequently, the revelation event that founded the Christian community was not constituted solely by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus but also by the experience of that divine self-gift by Jesus' disciples. The experience, in turn, must be understood integrally as involving not only the disciples' interaction with the earthly and risen Jesus but their interpretation of that interaction by which they came to understand the Jesus-event as the Christ-event and their bringing of that understanding to expression in witness, all under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had "handed over" to them. All of this, Jesus' self-manifestation to and in the disciples and their integral experience of and witness to this accepted self-gift, constitutes the revelation that founds the Christian community.

In summary, what we mean by "apostolic tradition" is this foundational revelation in its full integrity as uniquely accessible to us in the witness of those who participated in its original realization. Subsequent realizations, which are in no way necessarily or essentially inferior to or attenuated versions of the original (John 20:29), are possible only because of and through the witness that is the medium of that revelation. The importance of apostolic tradition arises from the fact *that* it happened and because of the nature of *what* happened. In other words, its importance lies in its foundational and mediational character, not in its chronological priority or qualitative superiority to subsequent experiences of revelation.

To return now to the question of date, this foundational experience of revelation cannot be exactly circumscribed in temporal terms. It includes at least the first two centuries of the Christian era and probably the first half of the third. It begins with the public life of Jesus and extends over the period during which the early community of disciples came to sufficient understanding of the experience to bring it to expression in written form and to recognize some of those writings as adequate and indeed sufficient witness to it. The writings in question include the books of the New Testament and the works of the Apostolic Fathers,[20] though the former, by the process of canonization to be discussed later, were eventually recognized as ultimately normative, and the latter became collateral literature.

We must, then, inquire into the peculiar importance of writing in the foundational experience. Certainly not all of the tradition that developed during the first two centuries found expression in the books of the New Testament. One might well surmise that most of the Church's early experience was passed on as unwritten tradition. Such things as forms of church order, the rituals of the sacraments, the content of most of the common prayers, the stories of the founding of most of the new communities, much of the experience of the new communities in working out relations with the Synagogue and the surrounding pagan society, and innumerable other elements of the early Church's experience were handed on by means other than writing, and much that we would dearly love to know about was not handed on at all. Why, then, does the small body of writing that we call the New Testament have the normative significance within tradition that it does?

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has shed much light on this question by his brilliant analysis of the relation of writing to speech, which I will have occasion to invoke often in what follows.[21] Living speech is integral to the events in which it occurs. The original formulation of Christian revelation was speech, first that of Jesus and then the witness of his disciples. But precisely because of its event-character, speech passes away, leaving only memory to recall it, and memory is notoriously subject not only to lapse but to falsification. When speech is written down, the event as meaning is "captured" as ideal meaning.[22] This ideal meaning can then be reactualized as new event by the interpretive act of reading. Of course, each new actualization will be somewhat different from preceding ones – and from the original – because of the many variations from one interpreter and one situation of interpretation to the next. But new actualizations can be compared with one another and with the written original, and judgments of validity and invalidity can be made. The written text is a touchstone of fidelity to the meaning of the original event that spoken tradition cannot, in the very nature of the case, assure.

When the early Church committed the apostolic witness to writing and recognized some of that writing as adequate to (not exhaustive of) that witness, it created documents that would function, for all future time, as normative of tradition. Without doubt, much that belonged to the apostolic tradition is lost to us. But because of the writings we have in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers, we have a touchstone of authenticity for the development of tradition down through the ages. This does not mean that nothing can be validly introduced into tradition that is not somehow, explicitly or implicitly, in these writings.[23] The simplicity (if not poverty) of the apostolic writings in comparison with the richness of subsequent tradition is striking. In fact, the paucity of the writings is itself a gift because it leaves to succeeding ages the responsibility of drawing out the potential of the tradition and this responsibility keeps the Christian intelligence and imagination engaged with the mystery tradition mediates. Were this not the case, Christian witness would long ago have degenerated into the wooden repetition of a body of material no longer being freshly appropriated, even recreated, for new times and circumstances.

To return to our earlier analogy with the foundation of the United States, we see a similar function of written documents in relation to the foundational experience and subsequent tradition of the nation. The entire experience from the landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock until the end of the Revolution constituted the foundational experience. Much occurred that has been passed down in legends and customs of various kinds, and much has not survived at all. But the cardinal importance of the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the official collateral literature (such as the Hamilton and Jefferson papers) that emerged along with these three cannot be exaggerated. Certainly the subsequent understanding of the American experience is much richer and deeper than the founding ancestors could have dreamed. And if we survive long as a nation it will become even more astonishing. But the touchstone of authenticity of later developments, what identifies and justifies them as true developments of the American tradition rather than subversions of it, is their continuity with the fundamental law of the land expressed in the founding documents, which must, themselves, be read in the context of the collateral literature that helps us to understand them.

We come then to a first appreciation of the relationship between tradition and scripture. Apostolic tradition certainly began earlier in time and is vastly more inclusive of the full foundational experience of revelation in Jesus Christ than the New Testament. And postapostolic tradition is coextensive with the appropriated history of the Church. But, by its very nature as the ever-developing historical consciousness of the Church, tradition rolls forward, so to speak, upon itself in a constantly modified and modifying movement, its contents never fully objectifiable at any moment. Scripture has priority within apostolic tradition precisely because it is written and, therefore, as fixed ideal meaning, can function as stable norm of interpretation. By its witness to the apostolic tradition, it enables the latter to function as norm of the subsequent development of tradition. To qualify as tradition does not mean to be a repetition of apostolic tradition. It means to be in living continuity with it. Continuity can involve not only deeper insight, but also new insight, and even correction and purification. What it cannot involve is appeal to a different revelation than that which took place in Jesus the Christ. At the heart of all valid preaching of the Gospel in every age is the "apostolic faith," that is, the Christ-event as it was experienced by his disciples in Jesus of Nazareth. And the touchstone of authenticity, the norm by which to test for the continuity of faith, is apostolic tradition itself normed by the New Testament.

c. Mode

We turn finally to the question of how tradition is developed and handed on. Again, our purpose is to call attention to something that was revalorized by the Second Vatican Council[24] but is still not sufficiently appreciated in much reference to tradition in preaching, practice, or even official ecclesiastical documents, namely, the variety of modes operative in the traditioning process. The Counter-Reformation reflex still fosters the tendency among Catholics to equate tradition with official doctrine and thus to regard authoritative teaching as the primary mode of transmission of tradition. Not only does this impoverish the concept of tradition itself; it leads to that exaggeration of the role of the magisterium that non–Roman Catholic Christians see as an unjustifiable assumption by church officials of power over the scriptures themselves.

Tradition is developed and handed on in a wide variety of ways, the most important of which is the liturgy, to which the preaching of the Gospel is integral. The dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi* applied originally to the liturgy. The norm of prayer (i.e., worship) is the norm of belief. We learn who we are as Church, what we believe, and to what we are called by our participation in the mystery of our redemption in the context of which the Gospel is proclaimed, explained, and appropriated. Faith easily becomes distorted and even degenerate when liturgy is not celebrated meaningfully and vitally. It is not insignificant that the Second Vatican Council's first act in the task of renewing the Church was not the refurbishing of doctrine but the renewal of the liturgy.

Tradition is also handed on in the variety of spiritualities that shape the faith life of Christians, in the feasts and customs of popular piety, in the ongoing endeavor of theologians to discern the critical correlation between the symbols of the faith and contemporary culture, in the ever-increasing literature of faith, in catechetical instruction and sacramental preparation, in Christian family life, through active involvement in and reception of the Church's ministry. In other words, wherever and however faith is lived, the tradition is being brought to expression, affected for good or ill, and handed on. Not all of these ways are equally important, equally efficacious at every moment in the history of the Church or in every place. Literature is undoubtedly more important to educated American Catholics than popular devotion. But the reverse may well be true in a village in Africa, a small town in Italy, or a *barrio* of Central America.

One of the most important formal ways in which tradition is transmitted, of course, is through the official teaching of the Church by the ordinary or extraordinary magisterium. It is not always easy to determine just what is official teaching, because it is nowhere all written down and because it must constantly be reactualized in terms of new situations. Furthermore, much in the teaching tradition that had great importance at one time in history has fallen into virtual desuetude or been recognized as doubtful or even erroneous.[25] Teachings that were not made explicit at all in earlier ages come to formulation under the pressure of new circumstances. For example, the insistence on the superiority of consecrated celibacy over matrimony seemed so essential at the time of the Reformation (which rejected monastic vows) as to find expression in the acts of the Council of Trent.[26] However, it was not reiterated in Vatican II's treatments of canonical religious life, no doubt because its irreconcilability with the renewed theology of matrimony and the recognition of the universality of the call to holiness in the Church made the dubiousness of its claim to truth evident. Similarly, the teaching of the American bishops on peace and war[27] could hardly have arisen except in response to the radically new situation created by the possession of nuclear weapons and the possibility of their use.

The question of the role of the magisterium in the interpretation of tradition will be raised in the next section, but the point here is that doctrine, solemnly or ordinarily taught, is only one form of tradition and the official teaching activity of the institutional church only one mode of transmission of tradition. In reality, official teaching depends upon other forms of tradition for its content and for the testing of its validity. The magisterium is not empowered to invent the tradition out of whole cloth, to impose on the People of God what Jesus does not call them to, or to sit in judgment on the foundational revelation. If at times it has seemed (to Protestants or even to Catholics) to do so, either it has been misunderstood or it has misunderstood itself and overstepped its bounds. Both have happened. But the fact remains that valid tradition must have at its heart apostolic tradition, and the touchstone of apostolic tradition is the New Testament.

We are now in a position to summarize our reflection on the meaning of tradition in relation to the New Testament. The principle or foundation of tradition understood as the effective historical consciousness of the Church is Tradition, that is, the Holy Spirit handed over by the glorified Jesus to the Church. This Holy Spirit who indwells each member of the Church unites them as the Body of Christ, the presence and action of the risen Jesus in this world. As the Church interacts with and participates in historical reality the life of the Spirit unfolds, revealing the richness of the revelation of God in Jesus the Christ, a revelation whose purpose and goal is the coming of the reign of God in this world. Because this development is a thoroughly human and fallible affair, part of the Holy Spirit's activity in the Church is to call it to and to assist it in criticizing and purifying its experience. The criterion of validity of the ongoing tradition of the Church is apostolic tradition, that is, the witness of the first generations of disciples to the foundational revelation experience of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. The New Testament, the sacrament of God's Word revealed in Jesus, is the stable written norm by which the presence and valid interpretation of apostolic tradition in the Church's ongoing experience is discerned and sealed. Tradition is handed on in a wide variety of ways differing in adequacy and importance, but the most important, indeed indispensable, mode is the celebration by the Christian community of the liturgy within which the Gospel is appropriately and truly preached. The understanding of the Gospel, which the Church must constantly deepen, depends on the ongoing theological development of the tradition, which is formulated as doctrine and authoritatively proposed to believers by the pastoral magisterium. This immensely complex process of development and transmission of faith is summed up in the word *tradition*, the content of which can never be fully objectified because it is the ongoing experience of the Church as subject of effective historical consciousness.

C. The Role of Tradition in the Interpretation of the New Testament

Having discussed the relationship between tradition and scripture we are now in a position to inquire into the effect of this relationship on the project of interpreting the New Testament. Although of necessity I will also be making observations about the reciprocal effect on the interpretation of tradition, this is not our main concern, and no effort will be made to deal systematically with this important theological question.[28]

1. The Hermeneutical Dialectic Between Scripture and Tradition

Since the Reformation the question of the relationship between scripture and tradition has been skewed by the felt necessity to define that relationship hierarchically, that is, by declaring once and for all either the superiority of scripture to tradition (the Protestant position) or the equality in principle but superiority in practice of tradition to scripture (the Roman Catholic position). It should now be clear that this approach is futile, undermining as it does the value in both positions. The relationship between them is not the relationship between two separate entities and *a fortiori* not that between two bodies of propositional revelation. They constitute a single reality, the historical consciousness of the Church insofar as this is explicitly appropriated and deliberately transmitted from generation to generation with the intention that what is transmitted will function as effective historical consciousness in the ongoing experience of the Church. The important distinction is not that between tradition and scripture but that between the apostolic tradition, which includes both the written and unwritten witness to the foundational revelation experience, and postapostolic tradition, which includes both the written and unwritten expression and transmission of the subsequent living of that revelation experience.

Our question then bears upon the relationship of tradition, both written (other than scripture) and unwritten, to scripture as the uniquely privileged written formulation of apostolic tradition. The relationship is best understood as a hermeneutical dialectic whose tension can be resolved only at the price of destroying the dynamic of both poles. Tradition, as we have seen, is more original, more inclusive, and fuller as witness to the foundational revelation. It includes the New Testament (and the distinctively Christian understanding of the Jewish scriptures as the Christian Old Testament) as the expression in written form of that which was considered most essential in apostolic tradition. Thus, by its own operation the Church created and established the norm of its own tradition.

However, scripture can only function as norm of tradition if it is interpreted. The notion that scripture is self-interpreting or that it delivers its "plain meaning" to any well-intentioned reader is not only naive but at least materially irreverent, though there was no intention of irreverence in the Reformation proposal of *scriptura sola,* which implied the virtually universal accessibility of biblical meaning. Even the daily newspaper does not function this way. To read most of the paper requires not only the ability to read the language in which it is written but also specific background knowledge for specialized parts such as the stock market, cultural education to the various literary forms such as political cartoons, and general immersion in the local scene and its concerns (the local tradition, if you will) that allows the initiate to follow crime investigations, sports events, and reports on local and translocal affairs. To assign to God the responsibility of miraculously enlightening the reader of the scriptures so that comparable formation and efforts of interpretation are not required in this case is presumptuous, to say the least.

The New Testament (and *a fortiori* the Old Testament) is a complex book, written in a language most Western readers do not command and thus available in and limited by translation, and emanating from a culture that was vastly different from our own. Even the specialized knowledge of experts in ancient languages, in the geography and history of the biblical period, and in all the other areas of importance for the work of exegesis is not sufficient to empower the reader to interpret the text. Important as such knowledge is, it functions optimally only within the context of the tradition that scripture brings to expression. In other words, the linguistic medium that allows the reader entrance into and communication with a faith world distant from our own in time and culture is the tradition that we share with that world. It is not only Greek that one must know to interpret the New Testament (that requirement can be partially overcome by translation) but what the text is about. This global sense of the meaning, which supplies the presuppositions that allow reading to begin and against which the reader must test interpretations of unclear portions as the reading process moves forward, is constituted by one's participation in the Christian tradition.[29]

Again, our legal analogy can prove helpful. It was the tradition of the first colonists that was brought to expression in the fundamental law of the land. By writing the Constitution the founders of the nation created and established the norm by which future experience would be judged as validly American, or unlawful and to be rejected. However, this document can function as norm only if it is constantly interpreted, and it can be interpreted only from within and in terms of the ongoing tradition of the nation. Congress continues to make laws, that is, to draw out the implications of the fundamental law for succeeding generations of Americans, and the courts continue to judge the people by the laws and the laws against the fundamental law by appeal to precedent and collective sensibilities in regard to equity, both of which are carriers of tradition, which forms the consciousness of lawmakers, judges, and citizens alike.[30]

In short, the relationship between tradition and scripture is that of a hermeneutical dialectic. Scripture is produced as part of and witness to tradition; it functions as the norm of that tradition; but it can only function as norm if it is interpreted from within and in terms of the tradition.

This raises the question that became so divisive during and after the Reformation, that of the agents and/or organs of interpretation. Tradition must be appropriated and used by someone in some kind of interpretive process if it is to function in the interpretation of scripture, and only the interpretation of scripture allows it to function as the norm of ongoing Christian experience, that is, postapostolic tradition. Who, finally, is responsible for this process of interpretation? The Reformers answered this question in favor of the individual believer, and the Roman Catholic tradition came down forcefully in favor of church officials, specifically understood as exercising the magisterium or the teaching authority of the Church.

Both positions are exaggerations, the danger of which is evident to anyone who reflects upon them. The classical Protestant position not only ignores the vast difference in preparation of individual readers but also makes very little provision for the ongoing need for consensus in the faith if the Church is not to splinter into sects on the basis of unbalanced insistence on one or another aspect of revelation. The fragmented history of post-Reformation Protestantism is eloquent testimony that this is not a purely theoretical danger. The Catholic position, on the other hand, tends to reduce the believer to infantile passivity while assigning what approaches control of the biblical word of God to whoever happens to occupy ecclesiastical office at the time. The rather abysmal ignorance of scripture characteristic of Catholics prior to the Second Vatican Council as well as the autocracy of ecclesiastical authority in some areas of Catholic faith and practice testify to the reality of the danger in this position.

In fact, both Protestants and Catholics have recognized, and tried to minimize, the dangers of their respective positions. Protestants, by their strong emphasis on preaching (and the consequent care and attention to the formation of preachers that has resulted in a generally more biblically learned clergy than Catholics have had), have energetically guided the believer's interpretation and ensured sufficient consensus in interpretation to guard the basic unity of at least the mainline communities. And the Catholic hierarchy, though not innocent of repressive interference at times in legitimate biblical research[31] and of virtually depriving Catholics for four centuries of the kind of personal engagement with biblical revelation that is integral to mature faith, has refrained in fact from defining the meaning of all but a very few texts of the Bible and has gradually come to recognize the legitimate freedom of scholars[32] and the absolute need of the People of God for constant and profound experience of biblically mediated revelation.[33]

The Second Vatican Council recognized explicitly that the work of interpretation belongs fundamentally to the Church as community, that is, to the whole body of the faithful, even though it repeatedly insisted that final authority in this sphere is reserved to the hierarchy. If what has been said about the gift of the Holy Spirit to every believer is true, then it follows with necessity that every disciple is, in a very fundamental sense, the carrier, custodian, and creator of tradition and the interpreter within the tradition of scripture that, in turn, is accepted by all as norm of the ongoing life of faith. While no one exercises this responsibility and prerogative in isolation but only within the community of faith, there is a constant dangerous tendency, especially in the Roman communion, to equate the Church with its leaders and to alienate the responsibility of all believers for interpretation by assigning it exclusively to the hierarchy.

In fact, however, even if it were desirable to reserve the interpretation of scripture to church officials it could not actually be done, because the interpretation of scripture is being carried out not only in formal situations of biblical research and magisterial teaching but in the ongoing liturgical, spiritual, and ministerial life of the Church. Today, especially, scripture is being interpreted (often in very original and enlightening ways) in base communities, in Bible study groups, by those (especially women) who feel alienated in the Church by the official use of scripture to marginalize and oppress them, by biblically based prayer movements, by individuals seeking deeper union with Christ through biblical retreats and personal meditation, and in numerous other situations. There is no question that much of this reassumption by the faithful at large of the task and privilege of interpreting scripture is the result of the encouragement flowing from the Council's recognition of both the centrality of scripture for Christian living and of the fundamental equality of all believers as active members of Christ responsible for themselves and their fellows.

However, this recognition that the task of biblical interpretation belongs fundamentally to the Church as community does not obscure the fact that not all believers are equally equipped to carry out this task. Not all are equally interested in it, committed to it, or prepared for it, and even if they were, the very nature of interpretation is such that consensus is not easily achieved or maintained. Therefore some formal provision must be made for authoritative interpretation if the Church's ongoing historical consciousness is to continue to constitute a single tradition. In other words, the Church needs biblical experts or scholars, biblical preachers and teachers, and a pastoral authority that oversees the proper integration of the participation of believers, scholars, and ministers of the Word in the ongoing work of interpreting scripture and fostering tradition.

To return once more to our legal analogy, we note a very similar structure in the ongoing process of interpreting the fundamental law of the land and that of interpreting scripture in the Church. The basic equality of American citizens grounds the responsibility and prerogative of every citizen to carry the principles of the republic into daily life. This process, which requires and involves a daily practical interpretation of the law, is usually carried out informally. However, it is sometimes formalized, as when the citizen stops a crime, makes a citizen's arrest, contests a citation, enters into litigation, makes a will, votes, pays or refuses to pay taxes, engages in public protest and even in civil disobedience, or performs any of the acts of citizenship that require her or him to interpret the law in the context of the basic values and beliefs of American tradition. But this does not obviate the need for the ongoing study of constitutional law by experts trained in this field or the need for lawyers, judges, and other civil officials, as well as for parents and civics teachers, who ensure the day-to-day transmission, inculcation, practice, and application to daily life of the law of the land. And we have a Supreme Court that functions as final arbiter in the interpretation of the law in especially difficult and complex cases that have more than usually serious consequences.

The analogy with the Supreme Court might also help to illuminate the appropriate role of the pastoral magisterium in the interpretation of scripture within the Church. On the one hand, it helps us to see, by analogy, that a final court of appeals is really necessary if a large and diverse community is to achieve and maintain an ongoing consensual fidelity to its foundational vision by means of the interpretive reactualization of its foundational documents. On the other hand, it helps us to see the kinds of limits that must be recognized both by the officials who exercise the magisterium of the Church and by believers if this service is not to degenerate into autocracy. When the organ that should be the final court of appeal in matters of supreme importance begins to be appealed to or to interfere in minor affairs or, more seriously, to impede the ongoing research of scholars through which questions mature, it loses the credibility that allows it to function nonoppressively in the situations in which its unique role is irreplaceable.

Three implications of what has been said about the reciprocal relationship between the magisterium and the rest of the faithful in the sphere of biblical interpretation are important. First, the magisterium or teaching authority of the church may and sometimes must make a binding judgment about the meaning of revelation. But its binding character need not be based on a claim that its judgment is infallible. It need only be based on the recognition of its necessity and an assurance that every reasonable effort has been made to assure its validity, which suggests that restraint is preferable to prolixity in this matter. Pope John XXIII's famous dictum that there should be unity in what is necessary and freedom in respect to everything else applies with special force in this situation in which the fundamental right and obligation of believers to interpret scripture under the influence of the indwelling Spirit is being limited for the sake of the common good.

Second, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which has opened new possibilities for the healing of old divisions between Protestants and Catholics, it is especially important to insist that the role of the magisterium in biblical interpretation is precisely one of interpretation, not of control. As the Council correctly recognized, the magisterium is, with the rest of the Church, subject to the Word, not in control of it.[34] Thus, the magisterium can neither impose meaning upon the text nor distort that meaning for extraneous purposes. If and when it should ever do so, its interpretation would not be intrinsically binding, even if pastoral responsibility might sometimes lead Catholic scholars or preachers to refrain from contesting it in public. In other words, there can be a legitimate and limited role recognized for the magisterium in the entire Church's work of interpretation that would not consist either in alienating the responsibility of all Christians nor in assigning to church officials power over the Word. This role would be an aspect of the pastoral ministry of unity, not a monopoly of all the other ministries that must also contribute to the ongoing valid interpretation of scripture.

Third, a further qualification of the role of the magisterium in biblical interpretation flows from the very nature of the responsibility it exercises in the Church. Just as the justices of the Supreme Court cannot apply the law except by interpreting it, so the magisterium cannot determine the meaning of scripture for the Church today except by interpreting it. If those who exercise the pastoral magisterium are not themselves biblical scholars, then such interpretation (unless the pastors attribute to themselves some kind of literally miraculous divine illumination) depends on the work of the experts to which those charged with binding decision making must carefully attend and whose work they must not only not hinder but foster. Furthermore, the ecclesial work of interpretation,[35] as has been said already, can only be carried out in the context of tradition. Tradition is carried by the Church as a whole, by its faith, its liturgical celebration, its spirituality, its ministerial involvement, as well as by official doctrine. It is only in solidarity with the whole Church, that is, under the influence of the effective historical consciousness of the Church as a whole, that ecclesially valid interpretation of scripture can be achieved.

In summary, then, every aspect of the relationship between tradition and scripture in the work of interpretation is dialectical. Tradition is the essential context for the interpretation of scripture, but scripture is the norm by which the true and living tradition is discerned. Interpretation is fundamentally the work of the whole Church, but it can only fulfill its task in such a way that the essential unity in faith of the community is sustained and nurtured if the pastoral magisterium is wholeheartedly respected. The magisterium can only claim this kind of respect if it is responsibly exercised, and this requires that, on the one hand, it does not arrogate to itself prerogatives it does not have (such as power over the Word) and, on the other, that it operates in respectful reliance on the best biblical scholarship available and in solidarity with ongoing tradition operating in the whole People of God. Any attempt to resolve this multilayered dialectic by overemphasis on one pole or the other results in a shackling of the biblical word of God by an immobilization of the process of interpretation that alone allows the Word to live in each succeeding generation.

2. Canon as a Paradigmatic Instance of the Dialectical Relationship Between Scripture and Tradition

The question of the canon, that is, of the official list of books included in the Bible, was not finally settled by the Roman Catholic church until 1546, when the Council of Trent established the forty-five books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as the inspired contents of the Bible.[36] However, the list then adopted can be traced back at least to the fourth century. The canon might never have been defined if the canonicity of certain books of the Bible had not been challenged by the Reformers.[37] Today, the argument between Protestants and Catholics over the canon has been effectively abandoned, even though some minor divergences, more terminological than theological, remain. Most Protestants recognize, at least as deuterocanonical, all the books in the Tridentine canon, and Catholics do not hesitate to admit that, while all the books of the canon are inspired, they are certainly not all equal in revelatory power or in importance for the Church's faith and life.

We have repeatedly used the analogy of the multifarious relationship of the founding experience of the American republic, its founding documents, and the ongoing process of interpretation of the latter to illuminate the complex relationship among apostolic tradition, scripture, and ongoing tradition in the Church. However, one very important difference between the two is that the founding documents of the United States were deliberately composed as such by a group of people selected for and assigned to this task and the documents so composed submitted to the people for approval as the authentic and valid normative expression of their self-understanding as a nation. No such conscious, deliberate, and controlled process lies behind the composition of the New Testament or the establishment of the canon.

The various documents that now make up the New Testament were composed in various places by different individuals for a variety of purposes over at least the first century of the Church's experience. Some, like Paul's authentic Epistles, were very early recognized as authoritative documents. Others, like Revelation, were alternately included and excluded from official lists in various places over a fairly extended period. This raises the question of how the books that were, by the fifth century, accepted as canonical came to be accepted, that is, what the criterion of acceptance was and how it was applied. In fact, the answer to this question is an excellent illustration of the dialectic between tradition and scripture that we have been considering.

It is fairly universally accepted today (as noted in chapter 2) that while inclusion of a book in the canon entails an affirmation that it is inspired, inspiration was not the criterion for the book's inclusion. There is apparently no way to identify the characteristic of inspiration, in order either to establish (or to discredit) a book's claim to be included in the canon or to establish definitively that no books other than those in the canon are divinely inspired. The canon was established by the working of tradition in a variety of forms. Apostolic authorship in some sense of the word (not in our modern sense of authorship), extensive use of the book in the liturgy of some or virtually all communities, reliance on the book for the preaching and teaching of the faith by those charged with the care of the communities, exchanges of lists among the early communities, acts of local synods and councils, examination of the doctrinal content of the books themselves – all played a role in the establishment of the claims to inclusion in the canon of some books and the definitive, even if slowly matured, exclusion of others.

Gradually, as the Church moved out of the apostolic period, the importance of the written witness increased. Finally, the New Testament came to be regarded as the scripture of the Christian community, and the Jewish scriptures were related to it as the "Old" (in the sense of "ancient" or "earlier" or "preceding"– not "outdated" or "irrelevant") Testament. This Bible became the norm of tradition in the sense already described. The relation of Bible to tradition was not one of hierarchical or unilateral superiority of the former to the latter. The gradually achieved priority of scripture to tradition was due to its being written, that is, in Ricoeur's terms, to the priority of event *as meaning* over meaning *as event.*

The dialectic, however, does not end with the establishment of this relationship between scripture and tradition. The canon itself set up a dialectic in the sphere of interpretation. Once the canon was established, the Church was no longer dealing with a collection of documents but with a single "book," a unity that became the whole in terms of which each part, no matter where, when, or by whom composed, had to be interpreted. In other words, the real meaning of each book was affected by its inclusion in the whole that the Church recognized as its scripture. And, dialectically, the meaning of the whole was influenced by the interpretation of each part.[38] Thus, for example, the christological meaning of the Old Testament for the Christian is not an extraneous meaning "read into" the Old Testament by Christian piety but the effect of the inclusion of the Jewish scriptures in the Christian Bible, part of which is the witness to the historical occurrence of the Christ-event in Jesus of Nazareth that the Jewish scriptures in themselves (i.e., prior to their inclusion in the Christian Bible) viewed as unfulfilled promise.

Finally, the establishment of the canon set in motion the hermeneutical dialectic between scripture and tradition that has been the focus of our attention throughout this chapter. As long as the Church had no New Testament as such, the Jewish scriptures functioned as its Bible, which it interpreted in terms of its evolving apostolic tradition. The Jewish scriptures were used in the preaching of the Gospel, but it was the Gospel preaching that determined the meaning of the biblical texts, not the other way around. This Gospel tradition slowly came to written expression in the books that became the New Testament. These books, once they were recognized as canonical, grounded the relativizing of the Jewish scriptures (their recognition as "Old" Testament for Christians) and their inclusion in the Christian Bible. The Bible thus established became the norm of tradition in its oral, written, liturgical, and other forms, while the tradition continued to function as the context for the interpretation of these scriptures.

In summary, the establishment of the canon, including the composition of its books, their unification into a single book, and their recognition as inspired scripture, was a work of tradition. The scripture thus traditionally established became the norm of ongoing tradition, which, nevertheless, remains the indispensable context of the Bible's interpretation. The canon as a whole and its parts as canonical are in dialectical hermeneutical relationship to each other at the literary level, while the whole of scripture and the whole of tradition realize the same type of relationship at the level of the Church's life.

3. Faith, Tradition, and the Interpretation of Scripture

In this closing section we must return once more to the issue raised in the last section of the previous chapter, namely, the role of faith in the interpretation of scripture, especially, in our case, the New Testament. At this point we must introduce a further qualification into the conception of faith developed in the last chapter, namely, its "content" or thematic formulation. I am now talking not just about faith as a basic openness to the transcendent, and/or to the truth claims of the text about the transcendent, but to the Christian tradition that is the content of faith. Our question is, What effect, if any, does participation in the tradition have on biblical interpretation? Is it necessary, irrelevant, or a hindrance to valid interpretation?

The answer must unfold on at least three levels. First, in view of what has been said in this chapter about the relationship between tradition and the scriptures that it produced and canonized, it would seem that at least some extrinsic relationship with the tradition would be necessary for any valid interpretation of this text. In order to have available the presuppositions that make it possible to begin the interpretive process, one would have to have at least a basic acquaintance with the substance of Christian tradition. It is not possible, for example, to understand the New Testament presentation of Jesus as Messiah without some grasp both of how the early Church understood the Old Testament concept of messiah and of what the Church has actually come to believe about Jesus, whether or not one shares that faith.

At a second level, it would seem that someone who undertakes to understand the New Testament text, not just to decipher the historical meaning of isolated passages, would have to at least be open to the invitation that the text addresses to the reader. That invitation is precisely and explicitly to full participation in the tradition. The conclusion of John's gospel, "these things are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31), expresses the implicit intention of the New Testament as a whole. In other words, the New Testament is not a book of information about the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth and his followers; it was written from and for faith, as an expression of faith, to function as a norm and nurture of faith for believers, and to call to faith those who had not yet come to believe.

Obviously, different parts of the New Testament are concerned to different degrees with these three functions. But no part of the New Testament is devoid of concern with faith. The Bible is the Church's book precisely because it is a witness to and norm of the Church's faith. To interpret this book is to encounter the early Church's truth claims about that faith. As has been said before, interpretation in the full sense of the word cannot terminate in a phenomenology of textual sense but must proceed to the referent. To foreclose a priori the engagement of these truth claims is to vitiate the work of interpretation.

At a third level, as should now be clear, the optimal position from which to engage the meaning of the New Testament is that of full participation in the tradition that produced this book, canonized it as its authentic and normative self-expression, and constitutes its integral and authoritative context of interpretation. In other words, precisely because of the relationship between scripture and tradition in virtue of which scripture is the Church's book, faith, while not necessary for any interpretation at all, does provide the best access to the full meaning of the book (when accompanied, of course, by the requisite critical tools). Just as living experience as an American is not only not a hindrance to the constitutional jurist but a primary advantage, so living within the Christian tradition of faith is not only not a threat to scholarly objectivity in interpretation of the biblical text but provides a privileged thematic and intuitive access to its meaning.

Notes

1. Although Vatican II did not unambiguously resolve the theological issues involved in the relation of scripture to tradition or that of the magisterium (the Church's teaching office) to the Bible, it did retreat from the Tridentine "two source" position, and, though insisting that the magisterium is the authentic interpreter of scripture, acknowledged that the magisterium is not above the word of God but in service to it (*DV* II:10).
2. See Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 15–19. Available in English as "Prescription Against the Heretics," in *The Writings of Tertullian*, vol. 2, vol. 15 of *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), pp. 19–22.
3. A work now regarded as a classic (though not without significant critics) is Yves Congar's *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1960). Available in English as *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and A Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: Macmillan, 1967). For a concise treatment from the standpoint of contemporary implications of positions on tradition, including good select bibliographies, see *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition: Essays by Robert M. Grant, Robert E. McNally, George H. Tavard*, ed. Joseph E. Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1976).
4. *DV* II:7–10.

5. For a brief and well-documented account of the ecumenical convergence since the 1960s, as well as the remaining differences, see Robert Gnuse, *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture* (New York: Paulist, 1985), pp. 113-121.
6. An excellent exposition of the development of Roman Catholic theology of scripture and tradition and its convergence with Protestant theology, as well as the tensions that remain unresolved within the Catholic position and between Catholic and Protestant theologies, is John R. Donahue, "Scripture: A Roman Catholic Perspective," *Review and Expositor* 79 (Spring 1982): 231-244. His article is complemented by that of William L. Hendricks, "Scripture: A Southern Baptist Perspective," *Review and Expositor* 79 (Spring 1982): 245-257, and a joint statement "Scripture: An Epilogue," 258.
7. *TM*, pp. 324-341.
8. Linnell E. Cady, "Hermeneutics and Tradition: The Role of the Past in Jurisprudence and Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (October 1986): 439-463.
9. It is interesting that one of the more notable tensions in "Dei Verbum" concerns the subject to whom tradition, including scripture, is committed. On the one hand, this "single sacred deposit of the Word of God" (*DV* II:10) is recognized as entrusted to the Church as a whole, which, through its life, worship, contemplation, and study, interprets and hands on the apostolic tradition (*DV* II:8); on the other, its authoritative interpretation is reserved to the hierarchy exercising its magisterial function (*DV* II:10). See Donahue, "Scripture: A Roman Catholic Perspective," on this point.
10. See *TM*, part 2.
11. This has been vividly exemplified by the national fascination with the recent television series on the Civil War (*The Civil War*, produced by Ken Burns and Ric Burns [Distributor: Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1989]). The documentary used only still photographs and actual written documents from the Civil War period to present the historical event. In other words, the material facticity of the event was not modified in any way. But, as producer Ken Burns claimed, somehow the entire subsequent history of the United States is only understandable in light of that war and the war only understandable in the light of subsequent United States history.
12. See *TM*, pp. 280-285.
13. See *TM*, pp. 389-405, for a more detailed explanation.
14. Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 71.
15. This is the burden of Paul Ricoeur's very influential essay "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *HHS*, 131-144.
16. See *DV* II:8, which clearly reaffirms this participation.
17. For somewhat different reasons George Tavard, in "Tradition in Theology: A Methodological Approach," in *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition*, esp. pp. 114-24, argues against this "tradition/traditions" distinction, which has been used not only in Roman Catholic circles, e.g., by Pope Paul VI in his "Address at the General Audience" of August 7, 1974 (Italian text: "L'Osservatore Romano" [August 8, 1974]), but also by Protestants, e.g., in "Tradition and Traditions," in *Faith and Order Findings: The Final Report of the Theological Commission to the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, Faith and Order Paper no. 40 (London: SCM, 1963), esp. pp. 16-24. He suggests, rightly in my opinion, that the understanding should be reversed: tradition refers to the sum total of appropriated and transmitted Christian experience; traditions are the limited formulations distilled from this flood of Christian life.
18. For a succinct but comprehensive treatment of the much disputed question of the meaning of the term *apostle* in the New Testament and the early Church, the relation of "apostle" to "the Twelve," the criteria of apostleship, the possibility that women were included in the category of apostle, and the implications of the controversy for later church history, and a good brief bibliography on the subject, see the section by Raymond E. Brown, "The Twelve and the Apostolate," in "Aspects of New Testament Thought," *NJBC* 81:135-157.

    It is very interesting to compare the tradition about the closing of revelation "with the death of the last apostle" to the scene in John 21:22-23 in which Jesus' words about the Beloved Disciple "remaining until I come" were interpreted by the early Church as meaning that that disciple "would not die." In fact, what Jesus seems to be saying is not that the disciple would not physically die but that the tradition inaugurated by his testimony would live.

19. Probably composed between 90 and 120 C.E. were, at least, the Johannine corpus, some of the Catholic epistles, and the pastoral epistles attributed to Paul. Scholars tend to refer to the hundred-year period between 50 and 150 C.E. as "the New Testament period."
20. The works of these ancient writers are available in their original Greek with English translation in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols., trans. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library (New York: Macmillan, 1912-1913). More accessible and readable is *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. Cyril R. Richardson with Eugene R. Fairweather, Edward Roche Hardy, Massey Hamilton Shepherd (New York: Macmillan, 1970).
21. The best summary of Ricoeur's thought on this subject is his 1973 centennial lectures at Texas Christian University, an expanded version of which has been published as *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). Gadamer, in *TM*, pp. 389–405, deals with the same subject in explaining why hermeneutics, although it is a general theory of understanding that achieves itself in language, tends to be primarily focused on texts rather than on speech.
22. *Ideal* here is used in its philosophical sense to indicate meaning as idea or reactualizable form, not in its ethical sense as desired optimum.
23. This position has been suggested, especially in Roman Catholicism, as a justification for the dogmatic use of tradition as a "second source" of revelation alongside scripture. However, only a very loose understanding of *implicit*, one so loose as to be virtually meaningless, can be invoked to justify as implicitly scriptural such dogmatic declarations as the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption.
24. See esp. *DV* II:8.
25. For an eloquent and convincing presentation of this point, see "Community, Consensus and Truth," in Adrian Hastings, *The Theology of a Protestant Catholic* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 9-26.
26. Henricus Denziger and Adolphus Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 33d rev. ed. (Barcelona: Herder, 1965): 1810 (old no. 980); in English, *Denziger: The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari from the 30th ed. of Henry Denziger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1957): 980.
27. *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, Pastoral Letter of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on War and Peace. (Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, May 1983).
28. Biblical scholars since the Second Vatican Council have been more forthright in suggesting that scripture, especially the New Testament, be used as a norm in the interpretation of tradition. For example, monolithic approaches to christology, ecclesiology, and soteriology have been called into question on the basis of the theological pluralism in the gospels; exaggerated claims of ecclesiastical authority have been relativized; a hierarchy among dogmatic truths has been recognized; the problems involved in some traditional teachings such as the virginal conception of Jesus have been pointed out. In general, Catholics have begun to inquire about the biblical basis of whatever is proposed to faith or imposed as morality, whether this be the justification of excluding women from Holy Orders, the extension of quasi-infallibility to papal teachings, or strictures in the sphere of sexual morality.

    Raymond E. Brown has been the leading voice in American Roman Catholicism in trying to make the connection between the results of New Testament exegesis and church teaching. See, e.g., his *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine* (New York: Paulist, 1985) and *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist, 1975), each of which contains a series of essays on controversial issues; and *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973) and *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (Paramus, NJ: Paulist, 1970), in which he takes up at length difficult theological problems.
29. See *TM*, pp. 277–290.
30. I have developed this point more extensively in "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *BTB* 19 (January 1989): 3-10.
31. For example, during the period between the First Vatican Council (1869–1879) and the publication of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (the 1943 encyclical of Pope Pius XII that legitimated the use by Catholic biblical scholars of modern critical methods), Catholic biblical scholarship was largely repressed.
32. See Raymond E. Brown and Thomas Aquinas Collins, "Church Pronouncements," *NJBC* 72.
33. See *DV* VI, esp. 22; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), I:24; II:51.

34. *DV* II:10: "Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it."
35. I am, of course, talking here of the interpretation of the scriptures as the Church's normative written tradition, not of purely scholarly interpretation by nonecclesially involved researchers, which may make minimal reference to tradition. This will be taken up below in section 3.
36. It is outside the scope of this book to enter into the history or theology of the canon. Interested readers can refer, for a concise treatment, to the *NJBC* article "Canonicity," by Brown and Collins. For a full-length scholarly treatment, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987). A very accessible scholarly but less technical treatment is Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).
37. James Barr, in *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), esp. pp. 49–74, makes the important point that canonicity was not a major concern of either the community of Israel in relation to its scriptures or of the early Christian community in relation to the Old Testament.
38. The recognition of the hermeneutical implications of canonical form has given rise in the last two decades to canonical criticism that has at least two major forms: that of Brevard Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979]; *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985]), which puts very heavy emphasis (some critics, such as James Barr in *Holy Scripture,* esp. chapter 4, would say much too much) on the implications of the final form of individual books and of the Bible as a whole for the interpretation of the parts; and that of James A. Sanders (*Torah and Canon* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972] and *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984]), which emphasizes the implications of dynamic development of theological/religious themes throughout the canon.

PART II

Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture

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4

The World Behind the Text: History, Imagination, and the Revelatory Text

A. Reformulating the Question of the "Historical Jesus"

No matter how one eventually defines the term *gospel* or proposes to deal with the text of the New Testament, one must recognize that in some sense this text is historical and that its historical character is not accidental or peripheral but constitutive of the text as scripture. The Judeo-Christian tradition is essentially characterized by its experience of revelation as historically mediated. Until modern times it was assumed that the biblical text recorded history "truthfully," which was understood to mean that it recounted the story of God's dealings with Israel, of Jesus and the community that gathered around him, and of the early Church "as it really happened." The ancients were not so naive that they did not recognize that there were passages that could not be taken literally without leading to absurdity.[1] But they considered these passages as exceptions (even though frequent) deliberately placed before the reader by God to lead the reader to deeper meanings.[2] In other words, those passages that were not to be regarded as historically accurate could usually be recognized as such by the careful reader using known principles derived from faith and theology. The general assumption was that what was presented as historical in the commonly accepted sense of the word was historical.

In modern times, especially since the Enlightenment and the development of the modern conception of history and historiography, the notion of historical truth has undergone considerable development, and the confident assumption that texts which purport to be historically accurate can be regarded as such unless there is some serious reason to question the assumption has been definitively undermined.

Historians have reflected upon their own discipline and have discovered that written history is never an unbiased and straightforward account of "what really happened" but always an interpretation of select facts governed by the historian's concerns and point of view. Much of recorded history has been based on incomplete or inaccurate data, or has even been deliberately falsified for political or economic reasons. Furthermore, facts and truth are not the same thing. The truth can sometimes be best conveyed by altering the account of the facts or even by means of fiction. It is from these realizations that historical criticism in its modern form has arisen. The task of criticism is to decide what is truly historical evidence and in what sense. The modern historian does not assume the authority of her or his sources but confers authority on those sources that critical investigation shows to be reliable and valuable.[3]

For the first sixteen centuries of the Christian era the biblical text, although recognized as historical, was nevertheless considered to be immune from such critical scrutiny, because it was regarded as guaranteed by divine authority. However, from the time of the Renaissance on, this immunity came under question. If the Bible is an ancient historical text, ought it not be subjected to historical criticism? Arising in the late seventeenth century in the field of philology, historical criticism had achieved the status of a quasi-science by the nineteenth century. Despite the scandalized objections of church authorities, biblical scholars had begun to apply the new critical methods to the historical material in the Old Testament.[4] What they found was profoundly shocking to the pious and very disturbing to church leaders both Protestant and Catholic. The so-called higher critics discovered scientific errors in the text; they discovered historical mistakes or deliberate falsifications; they discovered evidence that the sacred authors to whom some of the books were attributed could not possibly have authored these works; they discovered evidence of multiple authorship and of successive redactions, of interpolations and emendations in the text. In short, what had heretofore been considered an inviolate text, guaranteed by divine inspiration as completely true and utterly reliable, was discovered to be an historical document in the strictly human sense of the term with all the limitations that that implied.

There were those who considered the mere suggestion of such fallibility in the biblical text blasphemous. These people distanced themselves definitively from historical criticism of the Bible and regarded the scholars who indulged in it as reprobate. Their contemporary successors are the strict biblical fundamentalists.[5] But people whose faith was more intellectually rigorous could not turn their backs on what appeared to be hard evidence. Some devoted themselves to trying to establish the credibility of the biblical text on the basis of the very criticism that seemed to be undermining it. Others decided that scientific truth could not finally be contrary to revelation and determined to pursue the new lines of study no matter where they led in hopes that whatever was discovered by the new methods would somehow conduce to the strengthening rather than the destruction of faith.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century that the methods of historical criticism began to be applied widely and generally to the New Testament.[6] For Christians, applying such methods to the New Testament was much more risky than applying them to the Old Testament. Interest focused particularly and intensely on the question of the "historical Jesus." Did the New Testament, in particular the gospels, give us a true portrait of Jesus of Nazareth, or a theologized "Christ of faith" who makes the real historical person forever unavailable? And if the New Testament is not an historically valid document, is there any secure basis for Christian faith?

After an almost frenzied attempt to discover in the New Testament texts the real, historical Jesus, scholars came to recognize that the gospels were not biographies and that no biography of Jesus in the modern sense of that word could be constructed from them. With the publication of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus,* which appeared in German in 1906 and was translated into English in 1910, the nineteenth-century liberal quest of the historical Jesus came to an end.[7] The gospels, it was recognized, are historical in some sense of the word, but they are so suffused with theological concerns that the reconstruction of the "facts" in their proper order is just not possible.

For some scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann, this meant that faith had to find its foundation elsewhere than in the factual data about the historical Jesus, for example, in the kerygma preached by the Church. For others, such as the so-called New Questers,[8] it meant that what historical research could uncover about Jesus, such as his message and his sense of existence, is what our faith really rests upon rather than upon biographical or psychological data about Jesus himself. More recently attention has focused upon the social setting of the Jesus Movement, the politics of Jesus, and his theology of God and the human person.

Central to this entire development is the realization that, in the wake of modern developments in the field of history and historiography, Christian faith itself faces a dilemma of major proportions. On the one hand, to declare the biblical text immune to scientific historical investigation is to deny the fully historical character of Christian revelation. On the other hand, to admit the historical character of the biblical text would seem to imply the subjection of revelation itself, at least in its biblical mediation, to human judgment and to make faith depend upon the findings of historical criticism, a very volatile discipline.[9]

Our task in this chapter is to situate ourselves in relationship to this long-standing question and to arrive at a tenable position concerning the historical character of the New Testament text and its implications for the enterprise of interpretation. I want to begin by suggesting that as long as the question of the historical character of the New Testament is formulated in traditional terms, there does not seem to be any way out of the dilemma described in the last paragraph. If the New Testament is regarded as primarily and essentially an historical document whose primary purpose is to recount historical events (for whatever purpose), then the appropriate question is whether it is a true and reliable account—if so, in what sense, and if not, what the facts of the case really are. Within this framework, exegetes can excuse themselves from attending to the implications for faith of what they discover, but an intellectually honest theologian or pastor cannot bypass the historical data uncovered by the exegete. Whether, and/or to what extent, faith depends on what historical criticism discovers the Bible to be saying depends on the role one assigns the Bible in Christian faith. That is a question for the churches, and one that the nonfundamentalist communions are answering in increasingly nuanced ways, but it cannot influence the research of the historical critic, whose work in this area is governed by the current practice of the discipline of history.

Because this approach seems to me to be necessarily nondialogical and to have fairly well run its course without making much progress in resolving the dilemma of how faith can be historically based in the New Testament without being constitutively dependent on historical research, I propose to reformulate the question itself. I do not want to ask if the New Testament (especially the gospels) is or is not reliable as an historical document or in what sense it is or is not, but rather how the New Testament text as medium of revelation (i.e., as sacred scripture) is related to its subject matter, namely, Jesus the Christ as primary instance of revelation. As we will see shortly, the historical is a dimension of that relationship but not the whole of it, and that has serious implications for the role of historical criticism in the overall enterprise of New Testament interpretation.

B. The Text and Its Subject Matter

In what follows I will be concerned primarily with the gospels as the focus of the historical question, but the application to the rest of the New Testament will be fairly obvious. Our starting point is the assumption that the character of a text derives from its relationship with its subject matter. The subject matter of the gospels, that is, what they are about, is not history as such but Jesus the Christ as definitive locus of divine revelation. Historicity is, of course, an essential characteristic of Jesus of Nazareth, as it is of every human being. But it is not exhaustive of him. Therefore, in order to examine the question of how the text (the gospels) is related to its subject matter (Jesus the Christ) a threefold distinction (to which a fourth member will be added in chapter 5) will prove helpful.[10]

First, we can speak of the **actual Jesus**, that is, the ontic Jesus in his facticity. This term, however, can apply to Jesus of Nazareth in his earthly career or to the glorified Jesus as he now is (however that is). Obviously, the earthly Jesus in his actuality as such no longer exists, any more than I as a child exist now that I have become an adult. The ontic reality of the earthly Jesus is, strictly speaking, not accessible to us as such (even though it can be evoked as memory) because it no longer exists. Jesus exists today as glorified Savior of the world who is the same person as Jesus of Nazareth. As such, that is, as he actually exists, he is truly accessible to us in faith. We encounter him in the proclamation of the Word, in the celebration of the sacraments, in the unity of the Church, in our own living of his life through the gift of his Spirit. The gospels are, first and foremost, about the *ontic (that is, the real or actual) Jesus, the glorified Savior of the world who is alive in our midst, not about the actual Jesus of the first century who is no longer existent.*

Second, we can speak of the **historical Jesus,** that is, the literary construct of the gospels as that construct bears upon the actual earthly Jesus (of memory) and mediates symbolically to us the actual glorified Jesus (of present faith). It is important to realize that the historical Jesus is not equatable with the actual earthly Jesus. The historical Jesus is *not a person but a linguistic construct* that has certain important characteristics that limit its range of application and its relation to the actual earthly Jesus (who was an historical person and is personally identical with the glorified Jesus).

The term *historical* has to be carefully defined. Not every true thing said about someone who actually lived is historical. If we define the historical the way historians define it, it is that which takes place in space and time according to laws of cause and effect and is, at least in principle, publicly available. In other words, the historical is not anything that ever happened, but only that which is in principle open to historical investigation. For example, Jesus' birth is properly historical, but the incarnation is not; Jesus' death is historical, but the salvation of the world by his death is not; the Easter experiences of Jesus' disciples are historical, but the resurrection is not. This does not mean that the incarnation, redemption, and resurrection did not happen or are not real. It means that they are transhistorical; they belong to another sphere of reality that is not the subject matter of the human discipline of history. They are available only to faith. Thus, when we speak of the historical Jesus we are speaking of *the literary construct concerning the actual earthly Jesus as that account mediates to us the properly historical dimension of his career.* But the Jesus-event, although intrinsically historical, cannot be reduced to the historical.

This brings us to the third term of our distinction, the **proclaimed Jesus.** By this term I mean the *construct of the paschal (i.e., Christian theological/spiritual) imagination construing the actual (both earthly and glorified) Jesus as the Christ and presenting that image in literary-historical form in order to elicit the faith response of the hearer/reader.* The proclaimed Jesus exceeds the historical Jesus because the proclamation bears upon not only what is properly historical but also upon the transhistorical, not only upon the actual earthly Jesus but also upon the actual glorified Jesus. The historical Jesus, as will be explained later, is the symbolic material in and through which the proclaimed Jesus is presented to us in scripture. But the historical Jesus (the literary construct concerning the earthly Jesus) is not coterminous with the proclamation any more than my body, the symbolic material through which my person is intersubjectively available, is coextensive with or exhaustive of my person.

In summary then, the relationship between the text and its subject matter is not exclusively or exhaustively, perhaps not even primarily, historical. Insofar as the biblical text is a human artifact it is, of course, entirely historical, the product of an actual process of composition that can be investigated, in principle exhaustively, by historical means. But in form and content the text exceeds the category of history while containing it. Its content is historical-theological, the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the definitive revelation of God. In form it is literary history, a complex phenomenon in which much that is not historical (such as the identity of Jesus as the Christ or his resurrection from the dead) is woven into the historical narrative in such wise that it all appears to be taking place on the same plane, within the framework of history in the strict sense of the term. The Gospel could perhaps best be characterized as narrative historical theology in which narrated history functions as the symbolic medium through which the proclamation occurs. In due time we must draw out the implications of this analysis for interpretive methodology, but first we must examine more closely the notion of the paschal imagination as the agent (i.e., the one who constructs) and the object (i.e., the one who is the addressee) of the proclaimed Jesus.

C. The Paschal Imagination as Agent and Object of the Revelatory Text

I have begun with the claim that the Gospel is not primarily an historical text in the usual sense of the word. The subject matter of the text is not exclusively or exhaustively the historical Jesus. Rather, the historical Jesus is the symbolic medium for the presentation of the proclaimed Jesus. The proclaimed Jesus is not coextensive with the historical Jesus but is a construction of the Christian theological/spiritual imagination, making use, among other things, of the historical material concerning the actual earthly Jesus and his followers but also of material about the actual glorified Jesus as he was experienced by his first disciples after the resurrection and as he is experienced in the ongoing life of the Church. For understandable historical reasons, some people will be more than a little uneasy with the suggestion that the gospels are works of the imagination appealing to the imagination, for just as they tend to equate historical facts with reality (which I have just tried to show is fallacious), so they tend to equate imagination with fantasy or unreality (which is equally fallacious).

The term *paschal imagination* is being used as a cipher for the Christian theological/spiritual imagination.[11] It is well to begin by insisting that *imagination* as I am using it here is neither the reproductive imagination nor the synthetic imagination, much less pure fantasy. The reproductive imagination allows us to recall the experiences we have had in the past. For example, I can imagine the inside of my car even though I am now sitting in my office. The synthetic imagination allows us to combine experiences or parts of experiences to create new realities in our mind that may or may not ever exist independently of our minds. For example, I can combine the color purple with the concept of giraffe and imagine a purple giraffe. Or, more usefully, I can imagine a new arrangement of my living room and then bring it about, thereby improving my environment.

Here, however, we are concerned with constructive imagination in the strict sense of the term, that is, with our capacity to construct our world.[12] The imagination is our capacity to create "wholes," or images. But these images are not static mental drawings of some real or unreal entity. This notion of image is difficult to form and to maintain because of our tendency to equate image with visual representation or mental picture. To develop this notion it might prove helpful to examine five characteristics of image as a product of the constructive imagination that we can then use to examine the Jesus-image of the Gospel. Part of the purpose in doing this is to demonstrate the rootedness in and relationship to reality of the work of constructive imagination.

First, imagination's images are **dynamic** rather than static. The image is the tensive cohesion by which the imagination construes as one, as a whole, that which is dispersed in experience. For example, a person might say, "When my mother died, my world fell apart." "World," in this case, is an image. The entirety of personal experience, life itself, is seen as a meaningful whole unified by a relationship that, when it ceased, left life fragmented, dispersed, and meaningless. World gave way to chaos. As we will see in a moment, a dynamic image like "world" is never fully objectifiable. It is not a picture of a thing but a principle of cohesion or unity. We structure our experience with many such images. For example, one might be operating out of an image of life as a journey, or as warfare, or as a pathless, raging sea. One might image human relationships as a competitive struggle, as a hierarchical arrangement, or as a mutually enriching dance of diversity.

The dynamic quality of images is apparent once we attend to the influence of such images on our feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. The paranoid person, for example, is one whose image of relationships is pathologically distorted. We consider it pathological precisely because of its lack of relationship to reality. Or again, much attention is being focused today on the far-reaching harmful effects on women's experience of the culturally mandated image of dependency and helplessness that has been called "femininity."[13] Examples could be multiplied, but the point is that the images are not static pictures but dynamic and tensive principles of wholeness governing entire realms of reality and experience. When they correspond to reality, they organize, enrich, and deepen our experience. When they are distorted, they deform and impoverish our experience.

Second, images **develop and operate hermeneutically.** The emergence of an image is often signaled by an expression such as, "I am beginning to get the picture." The person is beginning to intuit or deduce a part-to-whole relationship among disparate facts and experiences, and the emerging whole illuminates the parts while the newly meaningful parts build up the whole. The person finally says, for example, "I am beginning to see that this entire situation is structured by racism." The situation may be a job structure, an educational experience, a neighborhood, or all of these together. The image that is forming is an intuition of relationship of parts to a whole (racism, in this case) that not only unifies seemingly unrelated facts and experiences but also facilitates their interpretation. Being passed over for a promotion, getting a low grade on a good paper, finding everyone too busy for social interaction, having one's contributions met with silence, are beginning to "make sense," to "fit into the picture." Again, one can see how powerful images are in the shaping of our reality. They are not only principles of unity but principles of interpretation.

Third, images are **never fully articulated and clearly thematized.** The image is not a mental drawing that can be finished and thus adequately represent reality. The images of the imagination are fleshed out in interaction with reality. The image and reality reciprocally interpret each other in never-ending and ever-deepening spirals. The fundamental reality-structuring images, namely, the God-image, the self-image, and the world-image, are our best examples of this characteristic.[14] For example, a person might think that she or he images God as all-loving Father until tragedy strikes and a deep anger at God begins to fester. Unthematized but very real aspects of the *God-image* such as arbitrary power and unfeeling autocracy are coming to light in the experience of fear and anger. The God-image can never be fully objectified without reducing God to a creature of our fantasy. The same is true of world. World is everything that is not myself insofar as it is focused in my experience. Thus, every person does, to some extent, "live in her or his own world." The ever-changing content, organization, and significance of reality-as-a-whole is what the *world-image* unifies in never fully objectifiable or static ways. The same tension between actuality and potentiality characterizes a person's *self-image.* Although it influences virtually every endeavor and relationship in one's life, the self-image is always richer, more complex, denser than what one can consciously know of oneself at any given moment. Whenever the great images that structure experience ossify in a person, we encounter the narrowness and rigidity that characterize the ideologue, the compulsive, the fanatic.[15]

Fourth, images **operate simultaneously in relation to all three modes of time:** past, present, and future. Imagination shakes loose the "frozen" content of memory in the light of intention and current experience. The healing of memory, whether through therapy or prayer or some other means, is the work of the imagination breaking down ossified images from the *past* that have controlled feelings and relationships and reforming them into new images that change the interpretation of reality. We all experience the role of imagination in the formulation of intentions, plans, projects to be carried out in the *future.* Our most important image of this sort is our conception of what we want to become. And imagination works on the *present,* as we have already discussed, by constantly elaborating the images by which we organize and interpret our ongoing experience. All three modes interact continuously and simultaneously. For example, the image of oneself as whole and healthy in the future leads one to imagine the present as a therapeutic opportunity in which old and destructive images from the past that have dominated and constricted one's capacity for life and love are surrendered to the transformative activity of healing.

Finally, the imagination's images are **loaded with affect.** The terminally ill person who images her or his life as a prison is not speculating abstractly about metaphors for life but experiencing deeply, through the image, the helplessness, darkness, and hopelessness of the actual situation. The nurturing of this image might easily lead to suicide. Psychologists point out endlessly the effect of the self-image on a person's whole experience of life. Those who deal pastorally with people on an individual basis soon learn how profoundly controlled the spiritual life is by a person's God-image. In fact, it is only when the affect that is integral to the image begins to surface as conscious experience that the person comes alive spiritually to a God who is no longer an abstraction but real.

The proclaimed Jesus who is the inclusive subject of the Gospel as sacred scripture is constructed by the paschal imagination. The paschal mystery of Jesus, including his death on the cross, his burial, his resurrection and subsequent appearance to his disciples, and his final commissioning of them and ascent to the right hand of God is itself an imaginative construct. The unified whole that we call the paschal mystery contains elements that are genuinely historical (such as Jesus' death on the cross) and events that are transhistorical (such as the resurrection) and interpretation through biblical categories spoken of in physical language (such as ascent to God's right hand). This integration of historical experience with faith experience creates the tensive image of the "paschal mystery of Jesus" by which the diverse elements are integrated into a single reality.

It is the Christian imagination governed and enlivened by this image that presides over the construction of the proclaimed Jesus. The entire life of Jesus, including both its historical and its transhistorical dimensions, is unified in a tensive image that is given expression in the gospels. This image, the proclaimed Jesus, governed not only the creation of the gospels but the preaching of the early Church before and after the writing of the gospels, and therefore, all the other writings of the New Testament as well. To understand more fully the implications of this conception, it is necessary to return to the five characteristics of the constructive imagination's images and see how they are verified in the proclaimed Jesus-image.

First, the Jesus-image of the early Church was not static, a kind of mental drawing reproducing the actual earthly Jesus. It is interesting that the early Church gave us no physical description of Jesus. The image was dynamic and holistic rather than static and visual. Jesus was imagined as Messiah or Christ, as Son of God, as glorified Lord. The image was suffused with all the evocative metaphors of the Old Testament: Suffering Servant, prophet, shepherd, bridegroom, king, and so on. These were not so much "titles" or "names" applied to Jesus as they were tensive components of the dynamic image of him that fired the imagination of his earliest followers.[16]

Second, the image the early Church constructed of Jesus was hermeneutical in the double sense discussed above. The "parts" of the Jesus-image, the Old Testament metaphors and symbols as well as Jesus' own self-designations and the Church's discoveries about him, were assimilated into the Jesus-image. They were illuminated by their integration into the whole of the image, and the image was fleshed out, enriched, enlivened by the assimilation of material that was grasped as true or relevant. The image itself became an interpretive principle, a principle of selection among all the traditions and remembrances of Jesus and a guide to presentation of the material about the earthly Jesus. In other words, the image of Jesus developing and operative in the early Church guided the creation of the historical Jesus, that is, the creation of the literary work of the gospels as they bear upon the actual, earthly Jesus.

Third, it is clear that the Jesus-image was never fully and exhaustively articulated. In this sense, Jesus cannot and never will be fully objectified. We have four gospels—all true, but all different. Each is the product of the paschal imagination, a function of the Jesus-image, which is not a mental drawing or an ossified memory of the earthly Jesus but a tensive and creative principle of ever-new presentations of Jesus that, true and relatively adequate, are never exhaustive of him. The desire of so many people, lay as well as scholars, to establish the picture of the "real, historical Jesus"—by which they mean a complete, static, unchanging description of him that adds nothing and misses nothing—is a misguided project. The Jesus-image will never be fully articulated, nor will the process of elaborating the image ever cease as long as the Church believes. Just as the early Church responded to aspects of the Jesus-image that no longer say much to us, such as Jesus as the rock in the desert, we have enriched the image with our symbolic material, such as "omega point" and "still point of the turning world," which might not have meant much to our ancestors and may mean little to our successors in the faith. But just as the early Church accepted four articulations of the Jesus-image and rejected many others, judging them not merely by the external criteria of historical accuracy but by the intrinsic norm of its own living faith, so the community of faith will continue to accept and reject articulations of the Jesus-image in successive ages using as criteria both the scriptures and the wider tradition that comes to partial but normative expression in scripture.

Fourth, the paschal imagination constructing the Jesus-image affected simultaneously and interactively all three time dimensions of the Church's relationship with Jesus. It worked upon the memories supplied by Jesus' contemporaries, shaking loose the ossified forms of their experience so that new connections, hidden meanings, possible implications emerged from the words and actions and attitudes of the earthly Jesus. It worked upon intention, projecting the significance of Jesus upon the experience of his postresurrection followers and inviting them to enter a future that they would share with the glorified Jesus in the reign of God. But it worked especially in the present as principle of organization, interpretation, and appropriation of the ongoing life experience of the disciples. The sufferings and joys of this life were understood as real participation in the dying and rising of Jesus. Thus, the story of the earthly Jesus was understood in function of the life of his followers as their life was understood in function of his.

Finally, the Jesus-image was loaded with affect. The passionate attachment of his followers to Jesus guided and enlightened their ongoing relationship with him and with each other as well as their presentation of him in preaching and teaching. No attempt was ever made to give an "objective, unbiased, untouched-up" picture of "the real historical Jesus." This was not because his followers were lacking in objectivity, incapable of scientific detachment, uninterested in the facts. It was precisely because they understood the real significance of Jesus and the utter futility of any but the most involved relationship with him. Jesus had given them his Spirit, by means of which he and they enjoyed an experience of mutual indwelling. It was to this experience and the experience of community that derived from it that they bore witness when they preached Jesus to their contemporaries and finally wrote the essentials of the proclamation as gospels.

The gospels, in short, are the product of the paschal imagination. What they give us is the Jesus-image, or the proclaimed Jesus who actually lived and died in first-century Palestine, who now reigns gloriously as Savior of the world, who indwells his followers of this and every age, and who is the Christ in whom God is definitively and salvifically revealed. The interlacing of these elements, historical, transhistorical, and interpretive, is such that no effort of criticism can separate them, and, more importantly, the effort to do so is misguided from the start. This does not mean, as I will explain in greater detail later, that criticism must not raise questions about the historicity of the events narrated, about the original form of Jesus' discourses, about the influence on the Gospel (and the gospels) of theological concerns of the early Church, in short, about everything that present or future methods of criticism can explore. But what it does mean is that the Gospel as we have it is related to Jesus the Christ in a particular way that does not permit a purely historical analysis to reveal the actual earthly Jesus. More to the point, nothing would be gained (except perhaps the satisfaction of a wrongheaded curiosity) by such a reconstruction of the career of the earthly Jesus. The real Jesus is not the earthly Jesus stripped of transhistorical dimensions and uninterpreted by faith informed by the paschal mystery. The real Jesus is precisely the proclaimed Jesus. Part of the Jesus-image, and a constitutive and irreducible part, is the actual earthly career of Jesus of Nazareth that is at the heart of the image.

But just as there is no such thing as a human Jesus who is not divine or a divine Jesus who is not human, so there is no historical Jesus who is not the proclaimed Jesus or vice versa.

D. The Relation Among the Three Levels: Actual, Historical, and Proclaimed

Before taking up the question of the implications for interpretation of the foregoing material and by way of summary of what has been proposed, let us examine explicitly the relationship between the actual earthly Jesus and the historical Jesus, on the one hand, and between the historical Jesus and the proclaimed Jesus, on the other.

The "historical Jesus problem" of the last two centuries has centered around (although it was not strictly equatable with) the first of these two relations, that is, how the Jesus of the gospel narratives is related to the actual Jesus who lived in Palestine in the first century. It is important to bear in mind that the historical Jesus is not coextensive with the Jesus of the gospel narratives. As we have seen, there is much about Jesus in the gospel narratives that is not historical. So the question should be formulated as, How is the historical Jesus (the literary construct insofar as it bears upon genuinely historical material) related to the actual earthly Jesus (the person who lived in first-century Palestine)? In other words, To what extent is the presentation of Jesus in the gospels, insofar as it is historical, an accurate record of the life of the earthly Jesus?

First, we know that the correspondence of the historical account to the actual person and events is not complete, exact, or exhaustive. This would have to be said of any historical account, for it is never possible to see, much less say, all that any person or event entails. The gospel of John affirms explicitly that there is much that Jesus said and did that is not recorded in the gospel because, if it were all to be recorded "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

So the question becomes, Is that which we *are* given, granted that it is not everything, accurate? If by accurate we mean exact in its facticity, we must acknowledge, with most serious modern exegetes, that in many respects it is not. The disparities among the four gospels themselves make this fairly obvious. But if by accurate we mean true, that is, truth-bearing, then the answer is yes. To some extent this can be established by historical critical exegesis. But since we have very little material outside the New Testament itself and its collateral Christian literature by which to verify the facts regarding the life of the earthly Jesus, the attempt to prove the historical accuracy of the New Testament texts will always be limited to rather modest achievements. The more significant guarantee of the substantial truth of the account in the gospels is the acceptance of it by the early believing community, whose faith was as dependent upon true witness to the Christ-event in Jesus as ours is. In other words, faith does and must enter into the question of the historical reliability of the Gospel, not as a substitute for historical investigation that must be pursued as far as it can go, but as participation in a tradition that guarantees the reliability of the whole no matter how much the details come under question or elude explication.

In summary, there is relatively little about the earthly Jesus beyond the bare outline of his life that can be established with apodictic certitude from the historical account of the gospels. The historical Jesus is not a free-standing entity. The historical Jesus is an abstraction from a faith witness that is thoroughly suffused in content and form with theological proclamation. But this acknowledgment cuts both ways. Just as there is little apart from the bare outline of Jesus' life (which is already considerable) that can be "proved" in the sense of established as unequivocally factual, so there is nothing of importance in the gospels' historical account that can be "disproved" or established as purely fictitious. What needs to be laid to rest is the scientific prejudice that has bedeviled biblical research since the Enlightenment. It is not the case that a tough-minded, intellectually honest person must doubt anything that cannot be proven by quasi-quantitative, repeatable methods of investigation. Most of what is interesting and true in life cannot be proven in this way. But that does not mean that it cannot be established with the kind of certitude appropriate to the subject matter and therefore ground a perfectly valid assent. To assent to the proposition that at the core of the gospel accounts is a solid historical reality that, precisely because what it mediates transcends the history in which it is embedded, can never be separated out and fully articulated is an eminently reasonable (although not necessary) response to the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ in whom God is definitively revealed.

The relation of the historical Jesus (that is, the gospel accounts insofar as they bear upon the genuinely historical material) to the proclaimed Jesus is less difficult to grasp. Obviously the proclaimed Jesus, both the Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus-image as it comes to expression in the ever-changing experience of the Church's life, is both more and less than the historical Jesus. The gospels' Jesus (the proclaimed Jesus of the text or the "textual Jesus" we will investigate in chapter 5) is more than the historical Jesus insofar as the gospels present not only history but the transhistorical, not only facts but theological interpretation of the facts. However, the historical Jesus, precisely because of its rootedness in and relationship to the actual Jesus, creates a critical tension in the proclamation itself that grounds the endless efforts of scholars to interpret the text and of believers to understand it. In this sense, the textual Jesus never exhausts the riches of the One who is mediated by the historical Jesus. The same must be said, of course, of the Jesus-image in the ongoing proclamation of the Church. This image, as we have already said, is being constantly enriched by its interaction with and integration into the theology and spirituality of successive ages. The historical Jesus of the gospels has given rise, both in the gospel texts themselves and in subsequent preaching and teaching, to much that is both valid and true but of which its own authors could not have dreamed.

But, on the other hand, the proclaimed Jesus of successive generations is often less than the historical Jesus or the textual Jesus. Every age has its blind spots, its prejudices, and its ingrained sinfulness that make it deaf to certain registers of the Gospel message. The Jesus-image proclaimed by the Church is often less than—that is, unfaithful to—the historical Jesus in which that image is rooted, and it is the work of scholars, saints, and critics of ideology to discover that discrepancy and call for the purification of the message. Herein lies the tremendous importance of the historical Jesus and the scholarly work (historical critical exegesis) devoted to revealing it in the text. The historical Jesus, as the medium of the proclaimed Jesus, is the taproot of authentic faith in the real Jesus and the norm of the Church's proclamation. That proclamation is the medium of Christian faith in the actual Jesus, now the glorified Savior of the world.

E. Implications for Interpretation of the Relation of the Text to Its Subject Matter: The Problem of Methodology

While the work of interpretation cannot be reduced to the correct application of appropriate methods, textual interpretation, in its explanatory moment, necessarily involves the use of various methods. Deciding which methods are appropriate and how various methods are related to each other, as well as recognizing their limits, is a function of one's understanding of the text and its relationship to its subject matter. Although more will be said about methodology in the following two chapters, this is the point at which an overview of contemporary methodology in biblical studies in light of the proposed relation of the text to its subject matter will be most useful.

1. The Terminology

In my opinion, the classical terminology in the area of biblical methodology, which emerged in the wake of the post-Enlightenment development of the "higher criticism" and was based on an understanding of the biblical text as essentially, and for all practical scholarly purposes exclusively, an historical document has become at best obsolete. Until very recently virtually all biblical scholars described their methodology as a combination of literary criticism and historical criticism. They used the term *literary criticism* to denote the process (utilizing a variety of methods) by which they investigated questions about the production and status of the biblical text, for example, authorship, date and place of composition, language, history of forms, source identification and transformation, textual transmission, and the like. They used the term *historical criticism* to denote the process (involving a wide range of methods) by which they investigated the content of the text, for example, the changing meaning of words, the archaeological data and secular history pertaining to the persons and events referred to in the text, the relevance of collateral nonbiblical texts, the character of the audience for which the biblical text was written, the historical accuracy of the accounts, and so on.

In recent years biblical scholarship has been influenced by its association with the secular academy, in which the term *literary criticism* has a completely different meaning. At the same time a number of methods for studying the biblical text that are clearly historical in nature (although not exclusively so) but that were not part of what has been traditionally called historical criticism have been developed. Thus neither term is any longer clear in itself, especially to younger scholars who are studying the Bible in the multidisciplinary context of the university. Furthermore, the two terms together no longer cover the methodological terrain of contemporary biblical studies which has begun to include a number of new methods that belong to neither category. Consequently, the time seems ripe to remap this terrain using clearer principles of division so that both the distinctions and the relationships among the various methods can be perceived and the adequacy of pluralistic methodological approaches can be assessed.

First, it will be helpful to distinguish three terms: *method, methodology,* and *approach.* A *method* is a particular procedure, for example, statistical word analysis, used to generate a particular type of information, for example, the relative frequency of the use of certain terms in a particular text. *Methodology* refers to the overall structure and systematic interrelated functioning of a collection of particular methods (e.g., narrative analysis or structuralist analysis) that implement (some part of) an approach (e.g., a literary approach) to the text. I use the term *approach* to refer to a characteristic way of addressing/interrogating a text (e.g., a basically historical, or literary, or theological approach), which involves an articulated methodology or group of methodologies that in turn govern the role of particular methods. Thus, for example, a researcher taking a theological approach to a text might use a basically historical methodology that might involve the use of philological, archaeological, and sociological methods. Another researcher, also taking a theological approach to the text, might use a basically literary methodology that would involve structuralist, stylistic, narratological, and psychological methods. Both methodologies might involve redactional critical methods.

The approach to the text, which is itself a function of the questions that interest the researcher, ought to govern the construction of the methodology. In other words, rather than starting with a method or even an established methodology such as classical historical criticism, the interpreter starts with the questions that he or she wants to answer. This will necessarily require the development of an appropriate methodology, which involves the selection and articulation of particular methods suited to obtaining the information necessary to pursue the answers to the governing questions. Thus, there is no such thing as "standard methodology," even though there are commonly accepted and even standardized methods, because each researcher or team of researchers must develop a methodology appropriate to their questions.

Such a procedure is actually the reverse of that learned by many students in traditional biblical studies programs, who start by mastering methods and go on, logically enough, to assume that only those questions that these methods can answer are legitimate or academically respectable. Since the traditional methods are virtually all historical, many students have emerged from biblical studies programs convinced that only historical critical exegesis is "serious" biblical scholarship. Someone asking psychological, missiological, sociological, theological, spirituality, or feminist questions must be considered academically peripheral, if not downright frivolous.[17] Obviously, the understanding of the text that I am proposing will call such a monolithic and exclusivist scholarly program into question.

Second, it will be helpful to distinguish among a *way of regarding the text* (synchronic or diachronic), the *focus* of one's concern with the text (on the world behind the text, the world of the text, or the world in front of the text), and the *dimension(s)* of the textual material on which one chooses to concentrate (e.g., historical, psychological, literary, theological, etc.). These three aspects of the research question overlap, and scholars tend to use the terms from each area interchangeably, but distinguishing them can reduce some of the confusion resulting from the rapid proliferation of methods and approaches that the field of biblical research is currently experiencing.

Every text is the product of some compositional process. In the case of the biblical texts, a few, such as Paul's authentic letters, were probably produced by one person at a particular time. Most of the biblical texts, however, were composed from sources (which themselves have a history), often by a succession of authors, redactors, or editors and sometimes over a relatively long period of time. Consequently, one legitimate and often important question for the biblical researcher concerns the process of composition and the importance of that process for the approach selected. Approaches to the text that treat it essentially in terms of its history of composition are called **diachronic** from the Greek for "through time." Form, source, and redaction criticism are essentially diachronic methods, but most historical approaches to the text are basically diachronic.

A **synchronic** (from the Greek for "same time") approach to the text, by contrast, is concerned with the text as it stands at some particular point in its history of composition. Usually this point is its final canonical form (either in the original language or in a particular translation), but sometimes it is some intermediate stage, for example, the "original" (i.e., reconstructed) form of a parable before it was inserted into a given gospel. The canonical approach, which regards the final form and the biblical placement of a text as ultimately determinative of its meaning,[18] as well as structuralism,[19] which regards the text as a closed system of interrelated signs, are essentially synchronic, but most literary approaches to the text are basically synchronic. Whereas classical historical critical methodology was predominantly diachronic, contemporary literary methodologies tend to be more synchronic. However, most approaches to the text involve the use of both diachronic and synchronic methods, although one is usually preponderant.

The focus of concern is related to the synchronic-diachronic distinction but should not be identified or confused with it. The biblical text stands between an ancient situation (which produced it and to which it refers in some way) and the situation of a contemporary reader/hearer (which it addresses). Furthermore, it is, at least to some extent, a self-referential linguistic entity. Each of these three distinct and actual characteristics of the text can focus the concern of the interpreter.[20]

First, one can use the **text as a "window"** on the ancient world through which one can discern, to some extent, the author(s) and her or his historical, theological, and ideological agenda as well as the community to which the text was originally addressed and the ancient world in which that community lived. These are the questions with which historical criticism is primarily concerned. Second, one can be primarily concerned with the text as it is in itself, that is, in the way it functions to engage the reader and in the world of meaning that it generates. The text thus considered functions as a **system of signs, which generate meaning, and as a "mirror"** in which the reader is revealed to her- or himself in the process of engaging the text. These types of concerns are characteristic of literary critics of the Bible. Third, one's focus of concern might be the **significance of the text for the present:** the implications of the biblical material for contemporary theological reflection, the text's challenge for the contemporary believer, its transformative potential. These are the hermeneutical questions of the theologian, the scholar of spirituality, the pastor, the believer. This is also the point at which situational, praxis-oriented, and advocacy types of criticism (sometimes called ideology criticism) are of particular importance.

Again, it is usually the case that biblical interpreters combine interests in the world *behind* the text (i.e., the text as window), the world *of* the text (i.e., the text as linguistic system and mirror), and the world *before* the text (i.e., the text as transformative). However, the weight of the interest is not equal. The biblical theologian or the feminist ideology critic, for example, who is primarily concerned with the implications of biblical material for contemporary thought and praxis may be very concerned with the historical world behind the text because of what it contributes to understanding the present situation in the Church. Similarly, the historical critic who is primarily interested in the diverse christologies operative in various first-century Christian communities might also be interested in the implications of this diversity for contemporary theology. And both might utilize structuralist or narrative analysis as aids in the explanatory phase of interpretation.

Finally, the biblical text is multidimensional. As this chapter has been at pains to demonstrate, the text is thoroughly historical but not exclusively so. Both parts of this affirmation have important methodological implications. Because the subject matter of the text is Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed as the Christ, and because the text itself is an artifact produced in a remote time and place and transmitted to us through nearly two thousand years of Christian history, all biblical research must be historical in some sense of the word. However, because the purpose of the text is to proclaim Jesus as the Christ and thereby to foster the faith of disciples, it is not only legitimate but of primary importance that research not be limited to historical investigation. Biblical research into the theological, religious, and spirituality dimensions of the text is even more important, ultimately, than historical research, even though such substantive interpretation depends in a very real sense on historical research. In the last few decades scholars have come to realize that it also depends upon literary criticism, and can be enriched by psychological, sociological, and ideological criticism.

2. Various Methodological Approaches to the Text

a. Historical Approaches

In order to appreciate both the importance and the limitations of historical research, no matter what approach one takes to the text, what overall methodology is adopted, or what methods are deemed most appropriate for a particular research project, the historical dimensions of the text and the implications for methodology must be made explicit.

First, the text is a *human artifact* produced by real people in remote times and places and under certain historical circumstances; it is written in a particular ancient language according to forms in use at the time of composition and in the styles of particular writers; it was influenced by the thought, culture, and literature of its environment of composition. It is the task of history as a discipline to investigate all of these matters and their implications for valid interpretation of the text. The role of historical methods at this level is questioned by no one of even moderate sophistication.

Second, however, the text is *intrinsically historical.* As we have seen, the content of the New Testament is theological-historical, and the form is literary-historical. In other words, historicity is the nexus of form and content in the New Testament. As literary critics have made us aware, form and content are not two separable elements in a piece of literature. Their union is not extrinsic, like that of water to its container, but intrinsic, like that of soul to body. The historical material, in terms of the discussion of symbolism in chapter 2, is best understood as the symbolic material through which biblical revelation takes place. It is the mode of presence of that which cannot otherwise be communicated, namely, Jesus of Nazareth confessed as the Christ and experienced as locus of divine revelation.

It will be recalled that symbols, by nature, both reveal and conceal. There is an asymmetrical relationship between the symbolic mode of presentation and that which gives itself symbolically. In the present case, the historical material of the gospels is molded, or *formed,* by the literary dynamics of the gospel narratives into works of art. This assertion is not intended as a value judgment on the aesthetic quality of the gospels but as a placement of the texts in their proper sphere among written materials. These texts are not haphazard collections of verbal material or indiscriminate records but consciously literary linguistic constructions, that is, works. Furthermore, they are the kind of work that operates on the reader not primarily by the communication of abstract information for the purpose of intellectual enlightenment (as, e.g., a mathematical treatise or a computer manual might) but by the evocation of a total personal response for the purpose of existential (in this case specifically religious/spiritual) expansion. In other words, they are humanistic rather than scientific works. But, artistic though the New Testament works might be, the material that the literary form molds is pervasively (though not exclusively) historical. Somewhat like the historical novel, the gospels make historical material transparent to truth that transcends history itself. The historical material functions as symbolic material for the revelation of that which exceeds history. The difference, of course, is that the gospels are not works of fiction but of proclamation. The literary dynamics, however, are similar.

Looked at from the vantage point of *content,* the gospel is also historical. What is being presented is a linguistic version of that which was presented once in the flesh of the earthly Jesus. What the words and signs of Jesus, the content of his public ministry, were for his contemporaries, namely, the symbolic self-presentation of Jesus as God's self-revelation, the content of the gospel text itself is for later disciples.[21] And that content is, though not exclusively historical in itself, all subsumed into the story of the earthly Jesus so that the reader is invited, indeed forced, to raise historical questions about even the most transhistorical elements of the gospels because the historical setting is our only access to them. For example, our only access to the mystery of the resurrection, itself transhistorical, is the historical experience of the disciples described as "appearances" of the risen Jesus and their historical proclamation of its reality and significance.[22]

The thoroughly historical character of the New Testament text, not only as itself an historical artifact, but in terms of its content and form, explains the fully justified preoccupation of biblical scholars with historical investigation of the biblical text. What it does not justify is the unquestioned hegemony and virtual exclusivity of the historical critical approach to the text that has been characteristic of biblical scholarship for almost two centuries. For the moment, however, suffice it to say that the historical approach to the New Testament is the most evidently justified and necessary one, even when it is not the most important. Our question at this point concerns the objectives of historical investigation of the text and its limits.

As I have already argued, the purpose of historical criticism is not, or should not be, to try to determine the factual accuracy of the gospels in relation to the actual earthly Jesus in the hope of either validating or invalidating faith in Jesus as the Christ. Nor is it possible to extract from the gospels a fully rounded picture of Jesus, either biographical or psychological. However, historical investigation, while it cannot isolate the earthly Jesus in such wise as to check the historical Jesus of the gospels for accuracy, can evoke the tensive relation of the historical Jesus to the earthly Jesus in various ways that have important implications for theology and faith. For example, the realization (on the basis of historical investigation) that the earthly Jesus did not found a church (specifically the Roman Catholic one), appoint Peter the first pope, ordain the twelve apostles, or institute seven sacraments has had considerable influence on the faith of Roman Catholics and on their relations with other Christians. The ongoing historical interrogation of the text has as its purpose neither the sustaining nor the demolition of the faith (for neither is possible with strictly historical methods) but the clarification of the historical material that is the medium of revelation.

In summary, properly historical methods, by which I mean the best available methods of the contemporary discipline of history and not those of an outmoded historical positivism (which unfortunately still holds sway in some sectors of the biblical academy and especially among fundamentalists), can yield properly historical results that have enormous theological, religious, and spiritual implications. In this sense the question of whether faith is vulnerable, in some sense, to the vicissitudes of historical criticism must be answered affirmatively because, by clarifying the symbolic material of biblical revelation, or failing to clarify it, historical criticism does indeed influence the form and content of the Church's faith. However, because it cannot prove or disprove, validate or invalidate that faith, historical criticism is not the final arbiter of whether or what we believe. In other words, faith is relatively but not ultimately or absolutely vulnerable to historical criticism.

Furthermore, because the New Testament is not exclusively historical, because there are other very important dimensions of the text, historical investigation cannot arrogate to itself exclusive control of the domain of biblical research, nor can it function as the unique arbiter of the results of other types of investigation. It is the realization of its own limits that will finally allow historical criticism to enter into fruitful cooperation with other approaches to the text that are also necessary for integral interpretation.

b. Literary Approaches

As important as historical research is, literary research (in the contemporary sense in which it is used by scholars in the field of literature) is equally important. It is as true to say that the biblical text is thoroughly literary as to say that it is thoroughly historical. Although only some parts of the text are of superior artistic value, all of the text is literary in that it is a work composed of works. Whatever the nature of the sources used in the production of the various parts of the New

Testament, the final products, for example, gospels, letters, and acts are literary compositions. Therefore, literary research methods are appropriate and necessary for the study of all of these works.

Literary methods are concerned with the way a text works, both within itself and in relationship to the reader, in order to evoke and structure the event of meaning. Many recent developments in New Testament scholarship (notably narrative criticism, parable research, epistolary analysis, audience criticism, rhetorical criticism, and structuralism) have been in the area of literary criticism and have demonstrated the importance of the literary approach and the fruitfulness of literary methods. In the case of the New Testament, literary methods can never be used in total isolation from historical methods, if only because the text is an ancient one from a foreign cultural context, but there are numerous situations in which the contribution of historical methods is of relatively minor significance in comparison with what can be learned by the use of literary methods. An evident case in point is parable research, in which the prehistory of the current text is important but the literary genre of parable controls the process of interpretation. Much more will be said about textuality, genre, language, and literature and their implications for methodology in chapter 5.

c. Psychological and Sociological Approaches

An even more recent development in the field of biblical studies is the use of the human sciences, especially psychology and sociology, for the investigation of scripture. These approaches differ substantially from historical and literary approaches, which probably accounts for the fact that, generally speaking, they have met with greater resistance from the biblical academy than literary approaches. Because the biblical text is essentially (although not exclusively) an historical document and because it is a literary composition, the application of historical and literary methods arises from the nature of the text. It cannot be argued, however, that the biblical texts are psychological or sociological in the same way or to the same extent. Rather, because the texts are about and are addressed to human beings in community, some researchers have surmised that the models through which human beings as individuals and as societies are studied might be validly applied to the biblical texts and might reveal data not available through other kinds of research.

A variety of **psychological or psychoanalytic** approaches to the interpretation of biblical texts, the former usually based in some measure on Jungian theory and the latter on Freudian, have been suggested.[23] Both psychological and psychoanalytic methodologies can focus primarily on the interpretation of the text by the reader or primarily on the interpretation of the reader by the text. Whereas psychological methods emphasize conscious dynamics in the reader and the text, psychoanalytic methods attend to unconscious dynamics that are manifested in the text or the reader.

The attraction of psychological methods lies in the relevance of such methods to contemporary interests in personal transformation and in the depth comprehension of personal agents. And, although the ancient writers probably did not share our interests in personal psychological dynamics and certainly did not have our scientific categories for describing or analyzing them, they did frequently present their readers with rounded pictures of complex personalities. Furthermore, the New Testament is obviously written to influence the people who read it, and modern readers are aware of the extent to which transformation is a psychological rather than a purely intellectual process. Thus, the fact that the human and personality sciences are modern developments that were unknown to the biblical authors does not invalidate their use in interpretation provided that the interpreter does not attribute to the author or the biblical characters conscious concerns that neither could have had.

Although in principle the use of such methods is legitimate, in practice there are numerous problems with psychological interpretation. Not only does no theory of personality hold unquestioned priority in the field of psychology but none, at this point, can claim even relatively unchallenged validity for its theories or therapeutic techniques. Thus, it is not only the validity of applying such models to the text but also the validity of the models themselves that come under question. Furthermore, unlike historical and literary methodologies that apply, in some way, to the entirety of the biblical text, psychological and psychoanalytic methods, because they focus on individuals, can be applied only to certain texts (those concerned with individual personality dynamics) and/or to the individual reader. Nevertheless, psychological types of interpretation have produced some interesting results by highlighting dimensions of some texts that other methods have overlooked and by engaging readers with the biblical material in a way that more traditional academic approaches have sometimes been unable to do. Furthermore, by applying psychoanalytic tools to the analysis of readers, some reader response critics have been able to therapeutically undermine unreflective convictions about neutrality and objectivity in textual interpretation.

Sociological, or more inclusively, social science, approaches to the biblical text are of at least two kinds. One is primarily concerned with the analysis of the social situation of the reader and its effect on interpretation.[24] The reader, according to this theory, is not a literate monad confronting an objective text but is part of a cohort or reading public whose approach to texts in general and to this particular text influences the individual's reading. Sociological analysis of this type tries to discern and analyze this influence.[25] In other words, this first type of sociological interpretation is actually a part of the collection of approaches that has been called audience-oriented criticism and that attends primarily not to the text itself but to the interaction between text and reader in the process of interpretation.[26]

A second type of sociological interpretation involves the attempt to use sociological categories and/or models, particularly those developed in the field of cultural anthropology, to elucidate biblical material that interpreters have either overlooked or tended to assimilate too facilely to the sociological patterns and dynamics of the interpreter's own culture. For example, by using the social grid model of interpretation developed by Mary Douglas, Jerome Neyrey has been able to suggest relations between social reality and theological development in the Johannine community.[27] Bruce Malina and his colleagues have studied such sociological realities as power arrangements, the dynamics of honor and shame, the interpenetration of religion and other dimensions of ancient social life, and the experiences of time in earlier cultures, showing how different these realities were in biblical times from the analogous realities in modern Western culture.[28]

This type of sociological research is one form of a wider collection of approaches that is sometimes called social world research. It is actually another aspect of historical criticism in that it attempts to discern the social world in which the biblical events took place as well as that within which the text was written and to allow these historical social situations to stand on their own vis-à-vis the modern interpreter.[29]

Although the basically historical character of sociological and/or social world research makes it more generally applicable to a wide range of biblical material than is the case with psychological or psychoanalytic approaches as well as making its basic objectives more comprehensible to traditional biblical scholars, serious hesitations about sociological methods have been expressed. Sociological categories and methods of analysis were all developed by modern scientists reflecting from the perspective of First World Western societies on cultural dynamics as they can be perceived from our standpoint. They may or may not be applicable to earlier or very different cultures. To some biblical scholars the seemingly universalistic and even apodictic claims of some sociological critics seem overstated.

The same must be said for (and against) sociological criticism as has been said about psychological criticism. Obviously, the biblical events took place in a social world, and it is legitimate and even imperative to try to study that world. Furthermore, sociological dynamics are operative wherever people live in community whether or not they are aware of sociological theory. Therefore, the biblical text contains material that can be interpreted sociologically. The validity of sociological analysis depends partly on the validity of the descriptive and analytical models used and partly on the skill of the researcher using the models, but the legitimacy of attempting sociological criticism should not be questioned simply because it is a new approach.

The criteria for judging the results of both psychological and sociological approaches to the text will be those of effectiveness. If these new methods produce explanations that are as good as or better than those derived from more traditional methods, if the explanations are self-consistent and comprehensive in explaining the whole of texts rather than isolated fragments, if they reveal aspects of the text that have heretofore been invisible or answer questions that have heretofore resisted solution, if the data they produce accord with the solidly established data of previous investigation, they will have validated themselves. If the personality and social sciences prove effective for biblical research, and they seem well on the way to doing so, other types of inquiry into human reality may very well also be applied to the biblical texts.

d. Ideology Criticism Approaches

One of the newest forms of biblical criticism, ideology criticism, has certainly been more strenuously resisted by the academy than any other of the newer approaches. In a way it is strange that a profession that was built on a refusal to exempt the Bible as text from ordinary means of textual analysis finds it so difficult to accept the fact that the Bible, like every other product of human intelligence and sensibility, is not free of ideological bias. In another way, the resistance to attempts to expose the ideological bias of the New Testament is perfectly understandable, because much of the *ideology in the text* is replicated in the mainstream *interpreters of the text.* Ideology, that is, a thought world generated by and supportive of a particular power agenda, is usually only visible to those excluded from the power system.

Ideology criticism takes one of two major forms. People of color, non-Christians, and women tend to be concerned with the ideology *in the text,* that is, with the material in the text that presents them as inferior, marginal, or expendable. People who are poor and/or politically oppressed tend to be concerned with the ideology *of the interpreters of the text* who have used the biblical material to legitimate the economic and political status quo from which the dispossessed suffer. The agenda of the first group, of whom feminist critics are currently the most vocal in the academy, is to identify the biased material in the text and to expose it as ideology against the claim that it is part of Gospel revelation and therefore normative for Christian faith.[30] The agenda of the second group, among whom Third World critics stand out, is to identify the liberating material in the text and to insist on its revelatory and normative character against the contrary claims of their oppressors.[31]

What both strands of ideology criticism have in common is their realization that the Bible was produced and has been interpreted almost exclusively by the "historical winners," who have, deliberately or inadvertently, made history and interpretation serve their interests at the expense of the "historical losers." For almost the entire two thousand years of its history, the New Testament has been tied to the ideological agenda of religiously powerful, educated, economically secure, Caucasian males. In modern times, the period of interpretation that is most influential in family, society, and Church today, the interpreters have been almost exclusively white, male, seminary-educated clerics. These scholars are often unable to take seriously the suggestion that what they have regarded as purely objective research, produced by the most rigorously controlled methods, discussed and evaluated by their most eminent peers, and published in the most prestigious journals, is partially, and sometimes totally, vitiated by unrecognized bias.

Ideology criticism faces challenges, both from the text and from the academy, that other new approaches do not. Its aim is not primarily, much less exclusively, the simple elucidation of the meaning of the text, which has been the agenda of scholarly research since the Renaissance. Ideology critics are interested in changing the power arrangements in the academy, in society, and in the Church. Such critics are involved in a liberationist praxis to which their biblical research is integral, an approach that is unfamiliar to most biblical scholars who were trained in seminary or university settings for the pursuit of so-called pure and objective research. Ideology critics deny the actual existence or even the possibility of such research. Consequently, the resistance to ideology criticism in the academy is often not a reasoned engagement of its results but an emotional dismissal of its claim to participate in the scholarly discussion at all. In other words, it is the legitimacy of ideology criticism as an interpretive project rather than the validity of its procedures or the fruitfulness of its results that is questioned, although obviously if the approach is illegitimate the results are unfounded. We will return to this topic, particularly to the problems the text itself presents for liberationist interpretation, in chapters 6 and 7.

The acceptance of ideology criticism requires a conversion not just of the mind but of the heart and a complete reenvisioning of biblical research as a project.[32] Increasingly, however, younger scholars both female and male who have been influenced in their education by the "masters of suspicion" see the legitimacy and importance of calling into question the unruffled assumptions of the rich and powerful when the cries of the poor and the oppressed are heard at the margins. A new ideal of scholarly integrity and responsibility that replaces claims of unbiased objectivity with a conscientious effort to acknowledge and claim one's social location, to make one's personal as well as intellectual presuppositions conscious and explicit, and to keep one's work in constant dialogue with the disadvantaged is gaining ground in the academy. Like historical criticism, which is self-evidently necessary for historically conscious moderns, ideology criticism is not merely a procedure for analyzing texts but a habit of mind that will eventually seem self-evidently necessary for all responsible interpretation.

e. Theological, Religious, and Spirituality Approaches

A final collection of approaches to the biblical text includes those that are concerned with the subject matter of the text in the most substantive sense of the word, that is, with the faith that gave rise to the text, that is expressed in the text, and that the text seeks to evoke and nourish. Religion (i.e., the institutional embodiment and practice of faith), theology (i.e., the intellectual investigation and articulation of faith within culture), and spirituality (i.e., the personal living of faith) are self-evident concerns of anyone who wishes to interpret scripture. However, these faith-related dimensions of the text and the reader are, in many ways, the most difficult to access in academically responsible (not to mention controllable) ways.

There are two ways in which the faith dimension of the biblical text can be approached. The first is a basically historical-literary inquiry, assisted by the other methods discussed above, into the religion, theology, and spirituality **in the text.** The object of such inquiry is the religion of ancient Israel and the early Church, including beliefs, cultic life, and ethical-moral dispensations; the basic theology of Israel and of the Church as well as the theologies of the individual writers and/or traditions; the various configurations of personal faith life that come to expression in the different books or traditions in the Bible as well as the spiritualities of some more fully developed and/or important figures in scripture such as John the Baptist, Paul, Mary, and, of course, Jesus. While the primary concern of ancient and medieval biblical interpretation was spirituality and a major concern of modern biblical scholars has been biblical religion, especially as it is related to other ancient religions, it is contemporary source and redaction criticism that has focused attention on biblical theology, especially the theology of the individual gospels. And this attention to New Testament theology has rekindled interest in New Testament spirituality because post–Vatican II theologians have been more aware than their modern predecessors of the fact that theology arises out of spirituality as its exploration and articulation.

The second approach to the faith aspects of the biblical text is concerned with the **appropriation of biblical faith** in its institutional, intellectual, and personal dimensions by the contemporary reader/believer. This concern actually belongs less to the explanatory phase of interpretation with which this chapter is concerned than to the properly hermeneutical dimension that will be the concern of chapter 6. Suffice it to say that this aspect of the interpretive project is much less methodologically controllable, and biblical scholars have often been loath to get involved in it, preferring to deliver the more or less demonstrable results of exegetical and critical research to theologians and pastors in hopes that they will be able to make the connection between the hard data established by exegesis and criticism and the faith life of the Church. I will try to suggest in chapter 6 that such a division of labor is neither necessitated by scholarly integrity nor advisable, since it short-circuits the interpretive endeavor.[33]

3. Exegesis, Criticism, and Hermeneutics

The three terms *exegesis*, *criticism*, and *hermeneutics* tend to be used with very little rigor, often overlapping and/or being used interchangeably, in the field of biblical scholarship, and distinguishing them here is unlikely to affect that situation. However, they denote different foci of research that, although they cannot and should not be totally separated, are distinct. The distinction is important for a clear understanding of the nature of biblical research and of what researchers are trying to accomplish by particular procedures.

a. Exegesis

Historically, exegesis referred to the process of ascertaining the literal meaning of a text. The question of the traditional exegete is, What does the text say? Until relatively recent times what the text says and what the text means were assumed to be the same thing, namely, the so-called literal sense of the text, which supposedly designated what the biblical author intended to say as it was understood by the original audience to whom it was addressed. Recent work in the fields of literature and philosophical hermeneutics have undermined the seeming "plain sense" of every term in this definition, resulting in considerable confusion about the meaning and application of the term *exegesis.*

First, biblical scholars themselves, as they were challenged by the Church to show the relevance of historical critical research to the contemporary situation, began to distinguish between "what the text meant" (i.e., to its author and its original audience) and "what the text means" in the present.[34] However, for the exegetes, at least at the beginning of the discussion, the "really real" meaning (i.e., the literal sense) was the first, even though the second might be more existentially important.[35]

But, as contemporary philosophical reflection made us more aware of the all-pervasive influence of historical consciousness and the consequent impossibility of stepping out of our own historical horizon in order to enter, unencumbered by our own historicity, into the ancient world of the Bible, we became increasingly aware that the ideal of understanding "what the biblical author intended" was unattainable in principle as well as in fact. All we have to work with is what the text says, which, as anyone who has ever written for publication knows very well, may or may not correspond to authorial intention. Paul Ricoeur, who coined the term "semantic autonomy" to designate this liberation of the text from control by its author's intention, has shown that, far from being an obstacle to interpretation, the distancing of the text from its situation of composition actually endows it with a surplus of meaning that grounds its endless capacity to give rise to new valid interpretations.[36]

Finally, the work on symbol, myth, and metaphor in the fields of anthropology, comparative religion, and especially literature has made us aware of the essentially metaphorical character of virtually all nontechnical language.[37] Very few words, and even those only in very artificial contexts, are "steno-language," that is, terms that have an absolute, univocal meaning and a one-to-one relationship to what they signify. This discovery dealt the final blow to the quasi-scientific ideal of nineteenth-century exegesis: to find the one real meaning of a text.[38]

The object of the phrase "what the text says" was thus twice distanced from its nineteenth-century meaning and the traditional ideal of exegesis, to arrive at the literal sense of the text as the author intended it and its original audience understood it, was revealed as a romanticist-positivist chimera whose real contribution to interpretive theory was that it focused attention on the desirability of publicly verifiable criteria of validity in interpretation. Consequently, the term *exegesis* can no longer be used to designate a full-scale and self-contained interpretive enterprise. Exegesis today refers to a moment in the historical and/or literary critical phases of an interpretive project. It usually bears upon some aspect(s) of the text or its referent that is historically or linguistically obscure and that can be clarified by various kinds of historical or literary inquiry. For example, ferreting out the ways in which a particular word was used at a particular point in history, who held political power when certain events were taking place, what liturgical practices governed certain experiences, whether the existence of certain figures in the text can be verified, are all exegetical questions. Sometimes their answers are crucial for the understanding of textual meaning. At other times they are small building blocks in the construction of meaning. In short, exegesis cannot establish the meaning of texts, but it is almost always a necessary ingredient in construing the (or a) meaning of ancient texts.

b. Criticism

Criticism is a wider term than *exegesis* and carries fewer questionable scientistic connotations, which probably accounts for its being used more extensively, often as a substitute for or as inclusive of exegesis. Strictly speaking, criticism has to do with judging how well or badly something is done. However, because one cannot judge the quality of a performance until one knows what has been done, the term *criticism* tends to be used for the entire process of analyzing how the text does what it does and then judging the quality of the operation.

Under the influence of speech-act theory, criticism of texts in general and biblical criticism in particular is often divided into three types corresponding to the three moments in the speech act. Every speech act involves a speaker (or sender), a message (that which is sent), and a receiver (the one to whom the message is sent). By application, every textual transaction involves an author, a text, and a reader. Criticism can bear primarily on any one of the three. Thus, contemporary biblical criticism is often classified as historical, literary, or audience criticism depending on whether the primary concern of the critic is with what produced the text (including author, historical situation, theological concerns, etc.), the text itself considered synchronically, or the audience to whom it is addressed (the original audience for whom the text was written or later ones).

Within each of these broad categories, different methodological strategies have been developed. The most familiar ones are those concerned with historical criticism and whose purpose, as has already been discussed (in E.3.a. above), is to ascertain how and in what sense the text is historical and to judge the adequacy of its performance as whatever type of historical document it is found to be.

Literary criticism (as I described it in E.3.b. above) does not refer to questions of authorship, composition, textual transmission, and the like (the object of traditional "literary criticism" among biblical scholars), which belong to historical criticism, but to analysis of the text as it stands. Structuralism is perhaps the "purest" form of such textual analysis, in that it prescinds as completely as possible from all factors external to the text itself. But structural (as distinct from structuralist) analysis,[39] narrative criticism, poetic analysis, and the like are all concerned primarily with the text in its final form as a literary entity, either in its original language or in translation. The concern is to understand, first, how the text "works," that is, how it engages the reader in the production of meaning. Second, literary criticism raises the question of how well the text does what it does, how adequately it functions in the production of meaning.

Finally, audience criticism, the newest type among biblical critics, attempts to analyze the receiver of the text and/or the process of reading. This is perhaps the most speculative type of analysis, in that the only access to the original audience is the text itself. Rhetorical analysis attempts, through a study of the strategies and techniques operative in the text, to discern what effect the author was trying to have upon the audience. This can lead to hypotheses about the character and concerns of the audience and their congruence or lack of congruence with the positions of the writer. Another type of audience criticism, whose object of analysis is the contemporary audience, attempts to discern the effects of current (or past) sociological and psychological factors of the reading public on the meaning of the text as it emerges (or emerged) in those readers. In some cases, audience criticism tends to be dominated by historical interests, in other cases by literary interests, and often by psychological, sociological, ideological, and/or theological interests. But the focus in audience criticism is always on the interaction between text and audience, with the emphasis on the audience.

c. Hermeneutics

Neither historical, literary, nor audience criticism of the Bible stops short at the technical analyses of texts, because the purpose of such criticism is to discern the meaning of the text. Thus, virtually all criticism leads directly and organically into hermeneutics. Hermeneutics means interpretation that, traditionally, takes three forms: speaking, translating, and explaining.[40] Just to **read** a text aloud, meaningfully, is to interpret it. Where one places the emphasis, how one phrases the sentences, where and how one pauses, and so on constitute an interpretation. It suffices to listen to different preachers read the line from the Johannine passion account, "What is truth?" spoken by Pilate to Jesus (John 18:38), to realize how integral to reading is interpretation. Did Pilate speak cynically, pensively, sarcastically, dismissively, longingly? Was he asking the question of Jesus, or of himself, or was he challenging the bystanders? Did he say it aloud to all present or musingly? How one reads this line depends on how one has interpreted the entire interaction between Pilate and Jesus up to this point but also on the effect of what follows this scene on one's interpretation of this scene. The way one reads the line constitutes an interpretation of the entire trial scene.

Translation, contrary to the naive assumptions of some recent opponents of inclusive language in liturgical use of the Bible,[41] is not a process of finding verbal equivalents to words in the source language in the dictionary of the host language. It is a matter of "carrying over" (trans-lating) meaning from one linguistic world or culture into another. This often involves using completely different words in the host language from the so-called literal[42] equivalents of the source language. For example, if one tried to translate literally the American slang expression "he kicked the bucket" into French as "il a donné un coup de pied au seau" one would have completely destroyed, rather than carried over, the meaning. To translate accurately and well, one would have to find the French slang equivalent to "he died," for example, "il a cassé sa pipe," which, if literally translated into English, would mean "he broke his pipe." Obviously, the process of translating involves interpreting the language in its cultural context, getting to its real meaning rather than merely to the dictionary denotations of the text's words and the syntactical arrangement of the sentence.

The most important meaning of interpretation, however, is **explanation,** in the sense of making plain the meaning of a text that is obscure at the outset. It might be obscure because it is in a foreign language and thus must be translated. But it may be in an understandable language yet not be clear because of the complexity or difficulty of its subject matter, the strangeness of its cultural freight, or the unfamiliarity of its referent. Explanation is the process of clarifying the meaning of the text by abolishing all the obstacles to understanding offered by the text itself.

However, the process of interpretation in this last sense, which is very close to being a combination of exegesis and criticism, is not complete until the "fusion of horizons" or the integration of the meaning of the text into the world of the reader has been accomplished. This moment, which Gadamer calls "application" and Ricoeur calls "appropriation" (and which we will take up in detail in chapter 6), is integral to understanding, which is the ultimate goal of interpretation. A familiar example illustrates the distinction between explanation and understanding, which are dialectically related moments in the hermeneutical process and usually so closely related that their distinction is not discernible. When someone explains to a mother that her child has just been killed in an automobile accident she may very well grasp what has been said. But her composure and ability to handle details of claiming the body and preparing for the funeral may make it very clear that as yet she does not fully understand what has happened. Friends say that "it hasn't hit her yet," by which they mean that the integration of this event into her world—understanding in the full sense of the word—has not yet occurred.

Hermeneutics as a field of investigation is primarily concerned with the integral process of interpretation terminating in understanding in the full sense of the word. Because exegesis and criticism, as moments in the explanatory phase of interpretation, are actually better understood and are subordinate moments in the overall project, hermeneutics tends to focus on the moment of understanding. What does it mean to understand; how do we understand; what happens to us when we understand? As we will see, this involves both ontological and epistemological questions as well as the integration of the answers to these questions with methodological considerations.

In summary, exegesis, criticism, and hermeneutics are inseparable in the normal process of interpreting a text. In ordinary reading this complex process occurs as smoothly and invisibly as the complex process of breathing. However, when the process is thwarted and we cannot understand a text, when it breaks down in some way and we realize that we have misunderstood the text, or when the meaning that emerges cannot be integrated into our world, we are forced to attend to each of the moments in the process, and we become aware of just how complex it is. This book, and others like it, are concerned precisely with the complexity and richness of the process of biblical interpretation in all its dimensions and thus are referred to as studies in hermeneutics.

F. Conclusion

This chapter is entitled "The World Behind the Text" not because it is concerned primarily with the chronological priority of the Jesus-event to its embodiment in the text but because it is concerned with what gave rise to the text and with the relationship of these factors to the text itself. I have tried to show that what gave rise to the text was not simply the life of the actual earthly Jesus and the first Christian communities but the theological-spiritual imagination of the believing community, which transformed its historical experience into a dynamic image of Jesus the Christ as locus of divine revelation. The New Testament text is the product of that paschal imagination.

In order for the text to give rise, in succeeding generations, to the paschal imagination that is the source of Christian life, it must be interpreted, and part of the work of interpretation is the explanatory phase, in which various methods are used to clarify the meaning of the text. The methodological question, then, concerns which approaches to the text are useful for this task and which methods each approach must integrate in order to accomplish it. Our conclusion has been that a plurality of approaches is necessary, each involving a plurality of methods, because the text itself is literary-historical in form and historical-theological in content; because the text itself has multiple aspects, each of which demands attention at different times; and because it addresses readers who approach it as political-psychological-spiritual subjects for whom this text is a privileged revelatory locus of encounter with Jesus as the Christ.

Notes

1. Saint Augustine, in *De Doctrina Christiana* (available in English as *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. and introd. D. W. Robertson, Jr., The Library of Liberal Arts [New York: Macmillan, 1958]), deals at length with the problem of discerning what in scripture is to be taken literally and what is to be taken figuratively and how the true meaning of the latter is to be discovered. Although modern biblical scholars would not accept some of Augustine's hermeneutical approaches, the point here is that the ancients were quite aware that a naive literalism in biblical interpretation was indefensible.
2. See, e.g., Origen's explanation in *De Principiis* IV:2-3, which is available in critical English translation in *Origen*, trans. and introd. Rowan A. Greer, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1979), pp. 178-205. Augustine makes this same point in *De Doctrina Christiana* II, VI, 7, p. 37.
3. The most enlightening explanation I have encountered of the dilemmas, challenges, procedures, limitations, and possibilities of the historian and the implications of historical method for interpretation of the New Testament is Van A. Harvey's *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966). See esp. chapters 1-3, pp. 3-101.
4. For a succinct history of the development of modern Old Testament criticism and a current bibliography, see Alexa Suelzer and John S. Kselman, "Modern Old Testament Criticism," *NJBC* 69. For a full-scale treatment, see *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker, Society of Biblical Literature Centennial Publications (Philadelphia: Fortress; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985).
5. For a brief history of fundamentalism, an explanation of its varieties and basic tenets, and a bibliography, see Mark Corner, "Fundamentalism," *DBI:* 243-247. The most serious Protestant critic of fundamentalism is probably James Barr, whose *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) is a standard reference on the subject. For evaluations of contemporary fundamentalism from Protestant and Catholic perspectives respectively, see James A. Sanders, "Fundamentalism and the Church: Theological Crisis for Mainline Protestants," *BTB* 18 (April 1988): 43-49; and Leland J. White, "Fundamentalism and 'Fullness of Christianity': Catholicism's Double Challenge," *BTB* 18 (April 1988): 50-59.
6. For the early history of modern New Testament criticism, a succinct treatment of nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments, and a good bibliography, see John S. Kselman and Ronald D. Witherup, "Modern New Testament Criticism," *NJBC* 70. An excellent resource on modern and contemporary New Testament criticism is *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae, Society of Biblical Literature Centennial Publications (Philadelphia: Fortress; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).
7. Several recent articles provide a "state of the question" in regard to contemporary historical Jesus research: Paul Hollenbach, "The Historical Jesus Question in North America Today," *BTB* 19 (January 1989): 11-22, including an extensive bibliography; John Meier, "The Historical Jesus: Rethinking Some Concepts," *TS* 51 (March 1990): 3-24, including comprehensive bibliography in the notes.
8. The name derives from the original title of the book by James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983, first published in 1959), who built on the exegetical work of the post-Bultmannians, the hermeneutical work of W. Dilthey, and the new approach to history of R. G. Collingwood to suggest that a new access to the historical Jesus was possible. His efforts have been succeeded in the late 1980s and 1990s by a spate of new studies of the historical Jesus like Marcus Borg's *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).
9. A classic treatment of this dilemma, and one that retains its theological validity, is Gerhard Ebeling's "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protes-

tantism," originally published in German in 1950 and available in English in *Word and Faith*, trans. J. W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 17-61.

10. My reflections in this section are not identical with those of Harvey in *The Historian and the Believer*, pp. 265-268, but I acknowledge my debt to his thought in working out my own position.
11. I developed this concept at greater length in "The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Interpretation," *TS* 46 (March 1982), 52-68.
12. My reflection on the role of imagination in the revelation process has been quite influenced by the work of Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1979); Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay in Theological Method* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975) and *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
13. E.g., Madonna Kolbenschlag, *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-bye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models* (New York: Bantam, 1981).
14. See Kaufman, *Theological Imagination*, esp. pp. 29-95, on the three reality coordinating images.
15. See Hart, *Unfinished Man*, pp. 188-254, esp. pp. 211-219. This difficult section in Hart's volume is a very rich description of the function of imagination in relation to revelation and is worth the struggle with his language.
16. See Hart, *Unfinished Man*, pp. 237-242.
17. It is the first-rate scholarship of socially and ecclesially engaged scholars like Walter Brueggemann (see, e.g., *The Prophetic Imagination* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978]) and Phyllis Trible (see, e.g., *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984]) that has helped to legitimate approaches that are not primarily historical in their origins or interests. However, these authors have continued to use essentially historical and/or literary methodologies. Scholars using other methodologies, e.g., psychological, sociological, or structuralist, have not been as readily accepted.
18. This approach has been developed and proposed as normative by Brevard Childs in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) and *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), although he does not discount diachronic methods for the illumination of the historical aspects of the text.
19. See Robert M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts*, Semeia Supplements (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), for a very clear introduction to the meaning and method of structuralist exegesis. Daniel Patte's *Structural Exegesis for New Testament Scholars* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) presents an approach to structuralist exegesis that takes account of the questions and criticisms structuralism has encountered since its emergence in biblical studies.
20. In this section I am indebted to Paul Ricoeur for his distinction between the world behind the text and the world in front of the text, as well as his discussion of split reference and the self-reference of texts (see the brief but dense synthesis in *IT*, pp. 80-88), and to Murray Krieger, *A Window to Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), for the now famous "window vs. mirror" analogy. For an accessible explanation of how this distinction has influenced the development of biblical literary criticism, see Norman R. Peterson, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), esp. pp. 9-48. A much more technical but excellent introduction to literary criticism of the New Testament can be found in Stephan D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Amos N. Wilder, *The Bible and the Literary Critic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).
21. This point is well explained by Gail O'Day in *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), although her emphasis is on the literary rather than the historical character of the text.
22. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), pp. 82-92, for a good explanation of both the indispensability and the limitations involved in the historical mediation of the eschatological event of the resurrection. Brown prefers, however, to maintain the use of the term *historical* for the events themselves lest not doing so be read as a denial that they occurred.
23. See, e.g., Elizabeth Liebert, "That You May Believe: The Fourth Gospel and Structural Developmental Theory," *BTB* 14 (April 1984): 67-73; Wayne Rollins, *Jung and the Bible* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983); William G. Thompson, "Mark's Gospel and Faith Development," *Chicago Studies*

26 (August 1987): 139–154; Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973). Each author is using a different area of psychological theory to investigate New Testament material. Mary Ann Tolbert in *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 93–114, demonstrates the use of Freudian psychoanalytic theory in interpretation of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

24. See Susan R. Suleiman, "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3–45.
25. This type of analysis sometimes arises from and/or leads to the kind of ideology criticism typified by the work of Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) and *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984).
26. See Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 50–69. This volume is a collection of the most influential essays in reader-response criticism and constitutes a very good introduction to this whole area of inquiry.
27. Jerome Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).
28. See, e.g., Bruce Malina's 1988 presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association of America, "Christ and Time: Swiss or Mediterranean?" *CBQ* 51 (January 1989): 1–31.
29. Essentially, social world research focuses on the sociological or relational aspects of the social, political, economic, military, and other dimensions of the historical situation. For an introduction to this area of research, see Carolyn Osiek, *What Are They Saying About the Social Setting of the New Testament?* (New York: Paulist, 1984). For an extensive and carefully organized bibliography, see Daniel J. Harrington, "Second Testament Exegesis and the Social Sciences: A Bibliography," *BTB* 18 (April 1988): 77–85.

    For good examples of this type of research, see Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Sociopolitical Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); and Antoinette Wire, "Ancient Miracle Stories and Women's Social World," *Forum* 2 (December 1986): 77–84. Again, this type of research often arises from and/or leads to ideology criticism. An excellent example is Antoinette Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).
30. The most notable exponent of feminist criticism among New Testament scholars is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose masterwork *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) has established the legitimacy, importance, and scholarly respectability of feminist critical biblical interpretation. Important collections of essays that serve as a good introduction into this area of criticism are the following: *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, ed. Mary Ann Tolbert, Semeia 28 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983); *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985); *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).
31. See, e.g., Robert J. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel*, Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1990); Jose P. Miranda, *Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John*, trans. John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977); David K. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988). These are three quite different liberationist interpretations of the gospel of John.
32. See James P. Martin, "Toward a Post-Critical Paradigm," *New Testament Studies* 33 (July 1987): 370–385, for a fascinating description of the change in consciousness that is fostering the emergence of liberationist approaches in contrast to the status quo agenda in the academy that resists such developments.
33. See my articles "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," *Horizons 8* (Spring 1981): 23–39; "Freedom: Response and Responsibility: The Vocation of the Biblical Scholar in the Church," in *Whither Creativity, Freedom, Suffering? Humanity, Cosmos, God*, ed. F. A. Eigo and S. E. Fittipaldi, Theology Institute of Villanova University 13 (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1981), 25–52.

34. Krister Stendahl made this distinction, which has been invoked frequently in subsequent discussions of the topic, in "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. George A. Buttrick, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 418–432.
35. See, e.g., the articles by Krister Stendahl, "Implications of Form-Criticism and Tradition-Criticism for Biblical Interpretation," and John L. McKenzie, "Problems of Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Exegesis," *JBL* 77 (1958): 33–38 and 197–204 respectively, for representative Protestant and Catholic versions of this position. A much more nuanced position is presented by Raymond E. Brown, "What the Biblical Word Meant and What It Means," in *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 23–44.
36. See *IT*, pp. 43–44, and "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," *HHS:* 131-144.
37. Amos Wilder, esp. in his influential work *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), which was originally published in 1964, introduced modern literary theory into biblical studies. His work was taken up and expanded by Robert L. Funk, in *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), and Norman Perrin, in *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), as well as by such parables scholars as John Dominic Crossan, Dan O. Via, Mary Ann Tolbert, and John R. Donahue.
38. McKenzie, in "Problems of Hermeneutics," written in 1958, actually stated this ideal: "[I]f all scholars were perfectly objective, entire unanimity should be theoretically possible in exegesis itself; for the meaning of the Bible has been determined by its authors, not by its interpreters" (p. 199). While it is difficult to believe that this view was quite widely shared just thirty years ago, it is dangerous to forget it, because much exegetical work from that period and prior to it reflects this underlying presupposition.

    Amos Wilder, in his fascinating autobiographical essay that forms the Preface to the collection of his essays *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scriptures*, ed. and pref. James Breech (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 15–40, traces the development of contemporary biblical scholarship from its almost exclusively historical critical phase to its current much more inclusive and multidisciplinary self-understanding.
39. Although "structural" and "structuralist" are often used interchangeably, it is helpful to distinguish the former, which is concerned with surface structures such as repetition, chiasm, inclusio, etc., from the latter, which is the application of semiotic theory in the attempt to analyze deep structure.
40. One of the best introductions to modern hermeneutics in general is still Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), esp. pp. 3–45. For an excellent treatment of the influence of hermeneutical theory in theology and biblical studies, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
41. This problem will be addressed in chapter 7.
42. I will take up the inherent problem with the term *literal* in relation to language in chapter 6.

5

The World of the Text: Witness, Language, and the Revelatory Text

A. Introduction

Biblical scholarship in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries was dominated by concern with the world behind the text, that is, with historical questions. In the second half of the twentieth century the primary attention of scholars has gradually turned to the text itself and especially to what has come to be called "the world of the text." As we will see, this has not meant an abandonment of investigation by diachronic methods, that is, methods that inquire into the production of the text and its subsequent history, but it has refocused the use of these methods. Simultaneously, an array of new synchronic methods, that is, ways of investigating the text as it stands, regardless of how it came to be the way it is, have emerged to complement and at times challenge the older methods.

To a large extent this emergence of interest in the text is due to the so-called turn to language[1] epitomized by Martin Heidegger and his successors in the field of hermeneutical philosophy and Ludwig Wittgenstein and his successors in the field of linguistic philosophy. The effect of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur on biblical scholarship through the work of Rudolf Bultmann, the New Hermeneuts Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, the biblical structuralists, the new literary critics such as Amos Wilder, Norman Perrin and his school, and the parable scholars has been profound.

The text as written discourse is the medium that relates the paschal imagination that produced the text to the paschal imagination that the text produces. If, as I suggested in the last chapter, history is the nexus between the historical-theological content and the literary-historical form of the gospels, literature is the nexus between the theological-spiritual message and the historical medium. In other words, discourse is that which involves the reader with the subject matter of the text, namely, the apostolic witness to Jesus as the Christ or the proclaimed Jesus. Consequently, we must now inquire into the nature of the New Testament as text, both into the particular kind of discourse that we call *witness* and into its mode of being as *written* rather than spoken discourse.

B. The Text as Witness

The New Testament writers leave no doubt that the intention of their writing is to bear witness to Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles identifies the earliest preaching of the disciples of Jesus as testimony to him given by chosen witnesses (see Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31). The gospels are intended as written versions of this preaching. Luke proposes to deliver to his readers "an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:1–2), and his gospel ends with Jesus' own declaration to his disciples, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). One of the clearest statements in the gospels of the intention to bear saving witness is the conclusion of the gospel of John, "These [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31), complemented by the conclusion of the epilogue, "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true" (21:24).

The effect on historical scholarship of understanding the New Testament as witness has been a concern to verify the accuracy of the witness. Important as this might be, it has led to overlooking the more fundamental issue, namely, the nature of witness itself. It is to this question that we now turn to ask, *When* is witness needed? *Who* is qualified to bear witness, that is, to testify? *What* is the nature of testimony? And *how* is testimony given? Answering these questions will suggest both how the text is revelatory and what interpretation of such a revelatory text involves. For the sake of clarity I will use the word *witness* for the one who testifies, *testimony* for that which the witness provides, and *testifying* for the act of giving witness.

1. When Is Recourse to a Witness Necessary?

Obviously, when one has participated in an event one has no need of a witness. Furthermore, when an event is irrelevant one has no desire to hear a witness. It is only when an event in which one has not participated is deemed significant that one seeks a witness or that a witness steps forward. It may be the witness who thinks the word must be spread, as is the case with the early apostles who set out to preach the Gospel. It may be the hearer who desires to know what has happened, as is the case with the later reader of the New Testament. But in either case, the witness is necessary precisely because the hearer was not present for the significant event. Consequently, a primary concern of the hearer will be, necessarily, to ascertain the character of the witness and to verify the accuracy of the testimony.

2. *Who Can Testify?*

Before a judgment can be made about the quality of a particular witness, there must be criteria for any witness. The first criterion is that the witness have experienced the event, in other words, that the person be an eyewitness rather than one who obtained her or his information through hearsay. Herein lies the importance in the Christian tradition of the apostolic generation. The significant difference between the apostolic witnesses and later Christians does not lie in chronological priority or in immediacy of religious experience as such. Jesus' words to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen yet have come to believe" (John 20:29) testify to the Church's faith in the equality of discipleship between the eyewitnesses and those who come to faith by hearing. The difference lies in the relation of the apostolic generation not to Jesus the Christ (which all believers share) but to the events in which Jesus was revealed to be the Christ. They alone participated in the revelatory events that become revelatory text in the New Testament. Consequently, all subsequent belief, mediated by the text, is rooted in the witness of those who participated in the events to which the text testifies.

Second, the witness must be competent to testify and must testify competently. This requires that the witness understands what happened (or was said, etc.), is truthful in relating it, and is able to articulate it effectively. If any one of these three characteristics is absent, the testifying will be inadequate, at least to some degree. It is the presence and interaction of all three that renders the testimony valid. This is where the action of the Holy Spirit, the "inspiring" of the sacred authors (individuals or the community), is properly localized. In John's gospel the evangelist has Jesus himself assert that this is the role of the Spirit in the community: the Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth, specifically the truth about Jesus (John 16:13–14). Thus they will be enabled to bear witness to all that they have experienced: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26–27). It is because the disciples have participated in the Christ-event and are enlightened on its meaning through the gift of the Spirit that they are enabled to speak truthfully and effectively about their experience.

3. *What Is Testimony?*

Testimony is not simply an account of what happened. Someone telling a friend about a film or a novel or recounting what happened at a party is not necessarily bearing witness, giving testimony. Testimony bears on a matter of great significance to the hearer and thus is usually guaranteed by an oath or its equivalent. Most societies exact heavy penalties for perjury, that is, for bearing false witness, because the commonweal depends to some extent on all members being able to rely on formal testimony.

The oath identifies the salient positive characteristic of testimony in distinction from other forms of recounting, namely, that testimony is self-implicating discourse. The witness claims that her or his personhood and integrity are the guarantee of the truthfulness of the testimony, so much so that even God is called to witness and invited to exact retribution if what is said is not true. This accounts for the paradigmatic use of the term *witness* for the "martyrs," for those who forfeit their lives as warranty to the truth of their testimony. The implication is that the truth of what is being said is so important that one could not live humanly if one defected from that truth.

As Paul Ricoeur points out, truth is not established by martyrdom, because one can die for a cause that is neither just nor true.[2] But a position that has no martyrs in any sense of the word is quite probably either not important or not true. What martyrdom establishes is not the truth of the testimony but the totality of the witness's self-implication in the testimony. The truth may still be in doubt, but the identification of the witness with the testimony is not. The point of putting someone "on the witness stand" is to create the situation of self-implication that will make lying virtually impossible for anyone but the morally degenerate, who, it is hoped, will be ferreted out by cross-examination, as were the lecherous defamers of Susanna through the cross-examination by Daniel (Dan. 13:44–64).

Much scholarly effort has been expended in establishing that the writers of the New Testament were not morally degenerate; that is, they were not false witnesses. This is no longer an issue. What continues to exercise critics, however, is whether or not the witnesses, however morally truthful they may have been, were correct in their testimony. In other words, one can intend to tell the truth but be wrong about the facts. Here we meet the negative characteristic of all human testimony, namely, its necessary limitation. There is no such thing as totally adequate human testimony, not because witnesses are incompetent or untruthful but because of the necessarily limited relationship of human knowing to reality and to language.

First, there is always the possibility, and even the virtual necessity, of at least some degree of error or inadequacy in the witness's interpretation of her or his experience. No one can take in the totality of a situation with equal attention to all details. The resulting inadequacy of the account to the actual event may be simply a matter of incompleteness, or it may actually distort the account. One purpose of cross-examination, that is, of putting pressure on the testimony in order to discover the extent of its coherence, is to establish the relative quantity and quality of truth and error. A considerable amount of error, provided it is not crucial to that upon which the testimony essentially bears, can be tolerated. For example, one might be wrong about the exact color and make of the car that ran the stoplight but not about which of the two cars that collided ran the stoplight. Nevertheless, there is a point at which the sheer quantity of even minor factual errors weakens the hearer's confidence in the quality of the testimony as a whole.

Second, all testimony is partial and biased. One must select, even at the moment of experiencing, what will be integrated into the experience and what marginalized or even ignored. And everyone experiences from a particular standpoint, that is, from within a particular social location, against the background of a particular personal history, in terms of a particular language system, and so on. The discovery of the extent of male bias, for example, in the biblical witness has led to the development of feminist ideology criticism and has raised the question of whether the bias is so pervasive and distorting as to invalidate the New Testament as revelatory text.[3]

Finally, the admittedly limited experience that testimony embodies is further limited by the necessity for articulation. Language itself is limited in many ways, but the individual witness's limited competence in using the language is even more constricting. We have become acutely aware of the struggle of the early Christian witnesses to find language for their experience of Jesus as the Christ. They borrowed categories from the Old Testament, expanded and modified them, used them in original combinations, even exploded them in order to express their unique experience of God in Jesus. But the testimony they eventually left us is still replete with irreconcilable tensions, ambiguities, hyperbole, and linguistic "breakdowns."[4]

Thus, testimony is both the most reliable of human communications because of its highly self-implicating character and yet limited in so many ways that no absolute claims to inerrancy, infallibility, or total adequacy of any human testimony can be taken seriously by anyone who understands the nature of human experience and language.

4. How Does Testifying Occur?

No matter how close to an event a witness may be, the testimony to what has been experienced will be several removes from the reality of the event. First, the experience itself is already a modification of reality because to experience is to interpret and therefore to "language" one's interaction with the nonself. This does not imply that there is some free-standing objective reality that the experiencer approaches from without, experiences, and then expresses. Rather, it is to recognize that each subject's interaction with the nonself is a personal, perspectival, linguistic event of interpretation. All experience (with the possible exception of the mystical) is mediated by interpretation, and all interpretation is linguistic in some sense of the term. Consequently, the fact that an individual witness is testifying to her or his experience means that the testimony is one remove from a theoretically objective (that is, nonexperienced) reality.

Second, the process of formulating the testimony involves a process of selection, emphasis, arrangement according to some ordering principle(s), and numerous other processes that further distance the testimony from the theoretically objective reality.

Third, in articulating the testimony the witness must embody it in some literary genre. Most often this is narrative, but it might also be direct proclamation, aphorism or saying, poetry, prayer, or doxology. Every genre is a code according to which the material to be recounted is embodied. This code affects the account in profound ways. Casting one of the characters as hero, part of the event as climax, or a particular item as an obstacle to the hero's project not only involves interpretive judgments about the original experience but affects the meaning of every element in the account.

Testifying, therefore, even in the case of a fully competent witness, is a complex process of interpretation and articulation that places the testimony at least three removes from the originating experience. The implication of this for interpretation of testimony is that the interpreter must traverse this process of experiencing, formulating, and articulating in reverse order, applying critical pressure at every stage in order to rejoin, through the testimony, the originating experience.

We are now in a position to summarize this phenomenology of the New Testament as witness and to draw some fairly precise conclusions for the project of interpretation. The New Testament as a whole, and therefore to some extent in all of its parts, is essentially witness to the definitive revelation of God in the person, life, death, and glorification of Jesus of Nazareth. This witness is necessary because only those who were Jesus' contemporaries experienced the historical events in and through which this revelation occurred. Not everyone who was his contemporary and experienced the events encountered in those events God's revelation. In other words, the authors of the New Testament are testifying not simply to the occurrence of certain historical events but to the revelatory meaning of those events.

Thus, the reader of the New Testament is confronted with a particular kind of testimony. The trustworthiness and competence of the witnesses can be established beyond reasonable doubt, and the reality of the events as well as the fidelity (note: not the factual exactitude) of the accounts of them can be established with a fairly high degree of certitude. All of this can be done by means of the same exegetical and critical strategies that are used on other ancient documents. What cannot be established by scholarly investigation is whether the faith interpretation of the events upon which the testimony is based, namely, that these events mediated God's revelation in Jesus as the Christ, is correct. This interpretation is a faith act by the New Testament witnesses appealing for a responding faith act by the New Testament reader.

In other words, insofar as the testimony of the New Testament bears upon the revelatory character of the Jesus-event it is the expression of the paschal imagination constructing the Jesus-image of faith (the proclaimed Jesus) that, in turn, shapes the paschal imagination of the believing reader. There is at the heart of the New Testament testimony a faith affirmation that can be offered but not proved. To accept it is not unreasonable, any more than it is unreasonable to accept that the being of the universe, though historically the product of evolution, is an act of creation. But it cannot be reasoned to. That is, it cannot be proved. The honest reader of the New Testament can achieve reliable (although certainly not exhaustive or minutely factually accurate) historical knowledge of the Jesus-event and understand the Christian truth claims. She or he must then decide whether or not to accept them. Not to accept them bars such a reader from full personal engagement with the subject matter of the text; acceptance implies conversion. In either case, interpretation involves confronting the personal challenge to Christian faith that arises not from the nature of the historical events recounted but from the character of the text as witness to Jesus as the Christ, the definitive revelation of God.

C. The Text as Language

1. General Characteristics of Language

The linguistic nature of scripture as text is so obvious that it has been generally overlooked, or looked through, as scholars have attempted to understand the historical data and the theological meaning of the text. Contemporary scholarship, however, has focused our attention on the fact that the biblical text, as text, is first and foremost language.[5] It is even more pervasively linguistic than historical, although its historical character has captivated scholarly attention for centuries.

Three characteristics of language in general are relevant to our concerns. The first is that language, what is said, stands always against *the background of the vast unsaid*[6] to which it is related. It not only emerges out of this infinite background like a pinpoint of starlight against the vastness of the night sky, but it evokes the great penumbra of the unexpressed. Thus, there is no such thing as the final and complete expression of something in language, of the expressed as isolated and totally self-sufficient monad of meaning. This means that the positivistic ideal of ascertaining the "meaning intended by the author" or even the "literal meaning of the text" in any exhaustive sense of these expressions is unattainable in principle as well as in fact. No significant linguistic expression (with the possible exception of verbal ciphers for mathematical concepts) has a pure and simple univocal meaning that can be grasped once and for all. Rather, all language not only says something, means something, but evokes an entire range of meaning beyond itself that can be made explicit under different circumstances. We get a sense of this in ordinary conversation when someone says, "What you just said makes me think of . . . " something totally unrelated in the mind of the speaker to what she or he has just said. Texts, as language, not only say what they say but evoke a world of the unsaid that might well become articulate under different circumstances of interpretation. This unspoken range of meaning waits in the wings even as the spoken acts its part upon the stage of discourse. The cue for its appearance needs only to be whispered.

Second, language is *essentially symbolic.* In fact, it is the primary symbolic activity of human beings, rooted as it is in the symbolic reality of bodily existence and coming to fullness of being in the sensible rendering present of the otherwise imperceptible reality of thought and feeling. As the New Hermeneuts insisted, we do not so much understand language as understand *through* language. Language is translucent. It is, as Heidegger said, the "house of being" or the clearing in which being comes to stand. Language is the body of thought and feeling.

Everything, therefore, that was said about symbol in chapter 2 is eminently true of language. Language renders present reality that exceeds it and partakes in the power of that reality. The ancient Hebrews were so aware of this that they presented the creative power of God as active in and through the Word. God spoke, and being emerged. But because language is symbolic, it simultaneously reveals and conceals that which it renders present. This means that language is always, by nature, ambiguous and therefore susceptible to misinterpretation. Furthermore, language as symbolic is transformative, challenging the hearer to engage that which is brought forth in word and to be changed by that encounter. Jesus' frequent challenge to his listeners, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!" (see, e.g., Matt. 11:15; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35) is actually a challenge to enter into the symbolic universe opened by the language of the Gospel, a challenge to conversion.

Finally, language is *essentially metaphoric.* Contrary to the common assumption that language is usually literal and univocal and only becomes metaphoric in poetic or dramatic contexts, ordinary language is naturally metaphoric and polyvalent, and only in highly artificial and technical spheres does it become "steno-language" or nearly univocal.[7] Language seldom has a one-to-one relationship to its subject matter and is almost never coterminous with that subject matter. As was pointed out in chapter 2, the essence of metaphor is its tensive quality, by which it simultaneously affirms and denies, using likeness and dissimilarity to tease the mind into newness of thought. The more vibrant and effective discourse is, the more highly metaphoric the language of which it consists. Metaphoric language is innovative, challenging the mind to exceed the bounds of the expressed and conceive what cannot be grasped in clear and distinct ideas. In metaphor the mind "feels" toward meaning with a reach that exceeds the grasp of pure rationality. This is especially true of the language of poetry, parable, aphorism, proverb, hyperbole – in general, true of the kind of language attributed to Jesus in the gospels and used by the gospel writers to explore that root metaphor for the project of Jesus, the reign of God.[8]

These three characteristics of language, its relation to the penumbra of the "unsaid," its symbolic nature, and its metaphoric character, are what make language the privileged vehicle of revelation. Revelation, as we tried to show in chapter 2, is not the communication of otherwise unavailable information or of particularly difficult propositions. It is personal self-gift, the self-gift of God to finite creatures.

Because language is a nearly infinitely manipulable finite resource, it bridges the gap between the infinite mystery of God and the finite human capacity for mystery. Rooted in the limited reality of thought and sound, language opens toward the horizon of what cannot be thought or said. We can say more than we can know and thereby come to know it. We can describe what we have not seen and thereby imagine it. We can actually affirm that eye has not seen nor ear heard what God has prepared for us (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9) and thereby have some inkling of what awaits us. But once we begin to grasp the nature of language in and through which revelation takes place, we begin to see why the interpretive ideal of nineteenth-century historical positivism was not only unattainable but undesirable. The notion that every text had a univocal meaning that was coterminous with the intention of the author and that could be extracted from the text by the proper use of the correct methods was elaborated on the basis of a misconception of language as a system of labels invented *post factum* to name raw experience and then moved about and attached to similar entities, ideally as unambiguously and univocally as possible, in order to communicate clear and distinct ideas. A contemporary understanding of language exposes the project of so-called scientific (i.e., positivistic) exegesis as it was understood until quite recently to be a misguided enterprise that must be replaced by a truly humanistic engagement of the text as a linguistic mediation of revelation, that is, of the encounter between God and humanity through language.

2. *The Text as Written Discourse*

Attending to the language character of scripture points immediately to its modality as a written text. Hermeneutical philosophers as well as literary critics draw attention to the relation between oral and written discourse, a relation that is one of important similarities and, for our purposes, even more important differences. Five aspects of this relationship have particular significance for New Testament hermeneutics.

a. The Analogy of Written Discourse with Dialogue

Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* uses the analogy of dialogue, that is, of the conversation, to explore the relationship between text and reader in the process of interpretation.[9] Paul Ricoeur, on the other hand, states in *Interpretation Theory* that interpretation *begins* where dialogue *ends,* thus stressing the essential difference between the oral conversation and the process of interpreting texts.[10] Both positions contribute to an understanding of text and interpretation.

The important likeness between dialogue and textual interpretation lies not in the immediacy of oral interchange, which, as we will see, is precisely where written discourse differs most significantly from speech, but, first, in the fact that both dialogue (in the Socratic sense in which Gadamer uses it) and textual interpretation intend primarily and directly the understanding of the subject matter under consideration. Second, in both dialogue and interpretation the dynamic of the process is that of question and answer rather than that of empirical investigation of an inert object.

In a dialogue (as opposed, e.g., to a colloquy between lovers or a therapist's interview with a client) two people discuss a subject with the intention of coming to clarity about *it.* They intend primarily understanding not of each other but of the subject matter they are discussing. Thus, the dialogue is not furthered by one partner saying compassionately, "I can certainly understand why you would say that." It is furthered by one partner being able to say, "I understand what you have said about *x*, and I agree (or disagree) with you [about it]." The contrast, however, is not between warm subjectivity and cold objectivity, between a conversation that is person-centered and one that is thing-centered. Rather, the contrast is between the use of language to mediate the relation between persons and the use of language to mediate truth claims that must then be engaged as part of the process of subjective becoming. Both are transformative processes, but the conversion processes are different.

When the "dialogue partner" is not a person but a text, the same absorption in subject matter is apparent. The text "talks" about something. The reader tries to understand not merely the text as text but what the text is saying about something. That effort may well involve coming to understand the text as text, just as understanding what a dialogue partner is saying about the subject under discussion may involve coming to a deeper understanding of the person and her or his modes of expression, etc., but the final objective of the reader as interpreter is to engage the subject matter. In other words, it is the truth claims of the text, what the text says about reality (not to be confused or equated with doctrinal propositions), that the reader must grasp and to which she or he must respond with acceptance, rejection, modification, and so on. Aestheticism or pure formalism, which abstract from the subject matter of the text, that is, from its claims about reality, and immerse the reader in questions of style and ideal structure for their own sake, turn the text into an opaque barrier between reader and subject matter; the text should be a medium as transparent as possible for the engagement of its subject matter and truth claims.

The second significant similarity between dialogue and textual interpretation lies in the dynamic that, according to Gadamer, structures both exchanges, namely, question and answer.[11] In the dialogue about a subject, both interlocutors interrogate the subject by means of questioning each other, but the questioning bears on the matter under discussion, not on the subjective state of the partner.[12] By formulating and posing questions, the speakers try to elicit from the subject matter its meaning, what it offers of reality. In order to ask at all they must have some preunderstanding of the subject matter that enables them to ask about what remains unclear. The skill of the questioner in formulating questions governs, to a large extent, the quality of the encounter with the subject matter. To ask the right question and to ask it rightly constitute a hermeneutical art, the art at which Socrates excelled and through which he brought his dialogue partners to understanding of justice, beauty, and courage and thus to an understanding of themselves.

The attempt to interpret a text also involves a process of questioning, receiving an answer, and questioning further. The better one understands the subject matter of the text, the more adroit can be one's questioning of the text to elicit further understanding. The ultimate question concerns what Gadamer calls "the question behind the text," or the question that gave rise to the text.[13] Every text is the answer to a question about something. One does not fully understand the answer that the text constitutes until one understands the question to which it is the answer. This is strikingly clear in the case of gospel parables. If one thinks, for example, that the parable of the Good Shepherd (Luke 15:3–7) who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the desert to go in search of one that was lost is the answer to the question, Does God prefer bad people to good people? one will certainly misunderstand the parable.

The seemingly opposing proposition of Ricoeur, that hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends, bears upon neither the object of discourse (the truth claims regarding the subject matter) nor upon the dynamic structure of the process for attaining that object (question and answer) but upon the essential difference between the immediacy of oral discourse and what Ricoeur calls the "distanciation" effected by writing.[14] Ricoeur is challenging the naive assumption that reading is to writing as hearing is to speaking, which is based on the seemingly commonsense belief that writing is simply another form of speech.

b. Inscription and Distanciation

In his *Interpretation Theory,* Ricoeur explores the "sea changes" that occur when discourse is written down, that is, when oral speech is fixed by inscription and becomes text.[15] Three important changes that have a profound influence on the process of interpretation occur. They can be subsumed under the rubric of distanciation, or the relative alienation of written discourse from its original coordinates of production and reception, in contrast to the immediacy of oral discourse to its participants and setting.

The first distanciation is of the text from its **author.** In the case of oral discourse, the speaker and the spoken are virtually totally immediate to each other. The speaker controls not only what is said but the meaning of what is said. If someone who is listening fails to understand, she or he can question the speaker, who will clarify by further explanation or by correcting misinterpretation. As long as the speaker is speaking, the meaning intended by the speaker is the only correct meaning the discourse has. Thus, if a listener "accuses" the speaker of having just said something, the speaker may respond, "That is not what I said," or "That is not what I mean," and everyone recognizes the right of the speaker to clarify what she or he has said.

By contrast, once speech is inscribed as text, the meaning of the discourse is no longer governed completely by the intention of the author. The text now means whatever it can mean by virtue of the semantic range of its language and structures. The text is cut off from authorial intention and begins to live its own life as a medium of meaning. The student who appeals a failing grade on the grounds that the offending answers are "not what I meant" is making a futile appeal to authorial intention as the "true" meaning of the text. In fact, the student has been graded, and properly so, on what the text says, not on what she or he meant to say. It is the task of the writer to make the text carry the intended meaning, but even the consummate writer cannot finally control the meaning of the text, which, as we will see, always exceeds (although it does not necessarily falsify) the author's intention. In short, the semantic autonomy of the text grounds the surplus of meaning that makes multiple valid interpretations of a significant text not only possible but inevitable and, indeed, desirable.

The second distanciation effected by inscription is the distancing of the text from its **original audience.** The speaker addresses his or her discourse to the present audience, taking into account its possibilities and limitations, its concerns and interests, its uses of language, the images that are current, and so on. Indeed, speakers who ignore these constraints of the audience are unlikely to be understood, much less effective. However, once the discourse is written down, that is, becomes text, it is no longer restricted in its appeal but becomes available to anyone who can read it. A major task of the historical exegete or of the literary critic involved in audience criticism is to try to reconstruct the original audience in order to understand what the text was originally intended to mean. However, the expansion of the audience from the contemporaries of the speaker to a universal readership means that the context of "hearing" is immensely expanded. Every reader brings to the text a background, experience, perspective, interests, other reading, and so on that influence interpretation. For example, what might have been said about war in the Old Testament, in the days of hand-to-hand combat between small forces, has to be read very differently in the context of nuclear arms. In the case of significant texts the expansion of the audience, indeed its potential universality, will exploit reserves of meaning in the text of which the author could not possibly have been aware.

The third distanciation that writing effects is that of discourse from its **originating situation.** Among other things, this closes off the possibility of ostensible reference, that is, the capacity of the language to refer directly to its subject matter as present. The speaker can sometimes point, literally or linguistically, to what is being discussed. When the speaker says "I" or "you" it is clear who is meant, and no other is included. In the case of the text it may be possible to decipher who was originally meant, but the reference is no longer limited to this original referent. Thus, when Jesus in the gospel says, "Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets" (Matt. 6:2), his exhortation is no longer restricted to the historical listeners he originally addressed but is spoken to all the readers of the text. Indeed, one purpose of writing the text was to make the message of Jesus available and applicable to a universal audience beyond the situation of first-century Palestine.

Besides replacing ostensible reference with textual reference, the distancing of the written discourse from its original and originating situation makes possible the decontextualization and recontextualization of meaning that allows a significant text to continue to function in relation to later and different situations. It is not only possible to play *Hamlet* in modern dress; it is possible for *Hamlet* to speak meaningfully to generations of audiences who are far removed from Elizabethan England and to situations that have nothing to do with British or Danish dynastic concerns. It speaks directly to the situation of the twentieth-century American because its meaning can be recontextualized. This recontextualization, as we will see, affects the meaning of the text just as the text's meaning affects the new situation.

In short, distanciation as Ricoeur describes it not only establishes a profound difference between oral and written discourse but it potentially enriches a text by enabling it to transcend the coordinates of its production and function in very different later situations. The written text now means all that it can mean (semantic autonomy) to whoever can read it (universal audience) enriched by its new situation wherever competent readers can be found (recontextualization). Thus, the text is potentially universal. This, of course, is precisely what the great religious classics of the world, among them the Bible, demonstrate. Distanciation does indeed raise serious challenges for the exegete who must overcome the distance in order to establish as nearly as possible the original meaning of the text, but it also offers immense possibilities to the interpreter who will exploit the distance to derive augmented meaning from great texts that no longer belong exclusively to one time, place, or people.

c. *Ideal Meaning Versus Authorial Intention*

The quest by the traditional exegete for the "meaning intended by the author" was motivated by a concern for objectivity of interpretation. The "real" or "literal" meaning of the text was equated with what the author intended to convey, and the task of the exegete was to unearth that meaning and deliver it to the reader. Although responsible exegetes knew that their efforts could never be shown conclusively to have attained the meaning intended by the author, the ideal of authorial intent established a direction and an optimal goal for exegetical work.[16] Presumably, it also allowed for adjudication among conflicting interpretations. Since all scholarly interpreters subscribed to the same ideal, the interpretation that could be shown to most closely approximate that ideal was the superior one. From what has just been said about the distanciation effected by inscription, it should be clear that authorial intent, even if it could be discovered (and there is really no way to do so in any verifiable, much less complete, way) cannot be equated with the meaning of the text.

In one sense this has always been acknowledged by biblical interpreters who recognized a "more than literal" sense in the biblical text. Whether such interpreters appealed to a theory of *sensus plenior,* canonical interpretation, or to allegorical or typological senses, they were acknowledging that, under divine inspiration, the meaning of the text could exceed, or even be different from, what was consciously intended by the author.[17] The real meaning of the text might not coincide with authorial intention even when the latter could be fairly certainly established. For example, there is little doubt, from a critical point of view, that the Song of Songs was not originally written as religious literature. But most biblical exegetes would agree that its placement within the canon of the Jewish scriptures modified its meaning and that the placement of the Jewish scriptures within the Christian canon modified it even further.[18]

The problem with appeals to divine causality as the explanation of such fuller meaning in the text is that neither its existence nor its effect can be demonstrated. It rests on an appeal to faith that, however legitimate, is entirely outside the realm of public discourse about texts. If the conditions of possibility for meaning that goes beyond authorial intent, that is, a surplus of meaning, can be established within the text as text (regardless of what faith might hold, quite rightly, about divine influence), then the conversation about such meaning in the biblical text can take place in the public forum.

If, however, authorial intention cannot play the role of an objective standard for valid interpretation, the question must be raised whether there is any norm against which interpretations can be judged and by which competing claims can be adjudicated. We will return to this question in detail in the following chapter on interpretation under the rubric of criteria of validity. Our concern here is not with criteria that govern our judgment about the adequacy of a particular interpretation but with the question of the "objective pole of interpretation." Is there anything *in the text* that grounds and governs interpretation, toward which valid interpretation is oriented, and that is commonly available to all interpreters of the same text and can thus ground at least a family resemblance among diverse valid interpretations?

Again, Paul Ricoeur's theory of interpretation is helpful in discerning such an objective pole of interpretation. As we have already seen (chapter 1, C), the meaning of a text, according to Ricoeur, is a function of the dialectic between sense and reference, a distinction Ricoeur borrowed from the mathematician Gottlob Frege and modified for use in his own hermeneutical theory.[19] The *sense* of a proposition (or a larger text) is what it says in virtue of its correct grammatical and syntactical structure regardless of its truth or falsity. A text such as "Run blues the eat of take" is *sense-less* because the parts of speech (verbs, nouns, etc.) are not properly arranged according to the grammar and syntax of the English language. One cannot inquire whether this "sentence" is true or false because it makes no sense. However, the statement "Cats are canines" is not senseless. It carries meaning, and that is precisely why we can judge its truth claim and declare it to be false. Unless a proposition makes sense, it cannot attain reality in any way (i.e., refer to the real world) and cannot be judged true or false.

Reference is the proposition's claim to attain reality, to be properly reflective of the real world. In short, it is the text's truth claim. The proposition "Cats are canines" intends to say something true about the real world. It fails in that intention, but we only know that because it is a proposition that makes sense and therefore we can judge the adequacy of its reference.

The dialectic of sense and reference constitutes the meaning of a proposition or a text. This meaning, however, is not meaning in the fullest sense of the word. It is what can be called *ideal meaning,* that is, a mental structure that governs the interaction between the subject matter of the text and the interpreter. In that interaction, meaning in the full sense of the word occurs as *event.* By way of analogy, the rules of tennis constitute the "ideal game" of tennis. They constitute a structure that governs the actual playing of a real game of tennis in which tennis in the full sense of the word occurs as event.

The dialectic of sense and reference that constitutes the ideal meaning of a text supplies an objective, that is, an intersubjective and potentially verifiable touchstone for all interpretations of that text. A virtually infinite number of different games of tennis can be played, but all tennis games can be recognized as tennis rather than, for example, football or poker and as sharing a family resemblance with all other games of tennis, and some such games can be judged superior to others. The number of valid interpretations of a text is theoretically unlimited, but the ideal meaning of the text must be realized in all valid interpretations. Thus they will all, no matter how diverse, be related to one another not by way of contradiction but by way of complementarity, and some can be recognized as more adequate than others.

It is, of course, easier to posit the existence of ideal meaning than to establish it in relation to any particular text. I would suggest, however, that the basic purpose of exegesis and criticism (in the sense suggested in chapter 4), as distinguished from interpretation in the full sense of the word, is to establish as rigorously as possible the ideal meaning of a given text. The traditional methods of historical critical exegesis supplemented by structuralist analysis based on semiotics enable the exegete to determine with some exactitude what the text says, while historical, literary, and auxiliary types of criticism help to establish its reference. The former, what the text says, is usually much easier to derive than the latter, however. And since reference is integral to ideal meaning, it cannot be bypassed or deferred to the interpretive stage of work.

The problem of reference arises because literary language, especially that found in significant texts, has a peculiar capacity to refer to something by means of reference to something else. The text refers, first of all, to what it is talking about (that is, its immanent reference), but it intends to reach the reader with implications for his or her reality (its ultimate reference).[20]

Often the situation is further complicated by the plurality of levels of reference within the text itself. For example, the statement Jesus "was handed over to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25) has multiple and diverse levels of reference. It obviously involves an historical reference: Jesus of Nazareth died by crucifixion. But it also involves a transhistorical affirmation: that he was raised from the dead. It further affirms that this historical/transhistorical event was salvific, a faith interpretation that goes beyond the empirically verifiable but that intends reality; that is, it makes a truth claim about how things really are. Finally, beyond the reference of the sentence to its own immanent subject matter (which is already a three-layered reference to an historical fact, a transhistorical event, and the faith significance of both), it refers to the reader's world with the claim that we are affected by that to which the sentence refers, namely, Jesus' death and resurrection. The reference is "split" because it refers inwardly, so to speak, to its own immanent subject matter and outwardly to the world of the reader.

The task of the exegete-critic (or, more realistically, of the interpreter in the explanatory phase of interpretation) is not only to uncover the sense of this sentence, that is, what it says propositionally. The exegete must also determine to what this proposition refers. Thus, there are historical questions such as who Jesus was, what crucifixion entailed, what the early Church believed about salvation through redemptive suffering and so on that establish the *sense* of the proposition regardless of whether it is true. The next task (which is not "next" in the chronological sense, of course) is to determine its *reference*. What does it intend to affirm about Jesus, his paschal mystery, and Christians' relationship to that mystery? Only then can the question of truth or falsity be raised, a question that can only be engaged by one who is open to the faith commitment elicited by this meaning.

As soon as one turns from the determination of the ideal meaning of the text to the adjudication of its truth claims, one has turned from the inward reference of the proposition to the "world of the text" to its outward reference to the "world in front of the text" or the world that the text projects ahead of itself and invites the reader to enter.[21] This second reference, to the world the text projects in interaction with the world of the reader, brings the interpreter into the sphere of hermeneutics, where meaning is no longer simply ideal meaning but becomes an event of meaning achieved in appropriation or application. This is the subject matter of the next chapter.

The work of the exegete and the critic in establishing the ideal meaning of the text is concerned with what I have called the objective pole of interpretation. Establishing what the sentence Jesus "was handed over to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" means, that is, what it says and what truth claim it makes in terms of the time and place and thought categories in which it was framed, is the prerequisite, the sine qua non, for all further interpretive work. Whatever the theologian, the preacher, the spiritual director, the liturgist, or the biblical hermeneut elaborates about the full personal and communal meaning of this statement (i.e., the whole of soteriology within the Christian tradition) must refer in an intelligible and compatible way to the ideal meaning established by the exegete-critic, or else it must successfully challenge the exegetical claim with an alternative meaning.

d. The Text as Art Object and as Work of Art

The text as written discourse is structured by its author according to the code of some literary genre in interaction with the author's own style. In other words, the text as text is not merely a transcription of oral discourse but an artistic creation.[22] As we saw earlier, this is not a value judgment on the aesthetic quality of the text (although some parts of scripture are beautifully written) but a statement of fact about the character of written discourse when it is composed, that is, constructed rhetorically to have a particular effect on a reader. The literary creation is not purely expressive, an effulgence of the sensibility of the writer. It is a bearer of truth that the author intends to engage the reader; that is, there is a noetic component in literary composition. The truth that the work (as opposed to a technical treatise, for example) intends to convey, however, is not predominantly propositional but existential. The iconic text intends to open before the reader a world of possibility, a way of being, that the reader must assess and either accept or reject.

Gadamer offers a helpful distinction, already mentioned in chapter 2, between the art object and the work of art.[23] The art object in this case is the text itself as a structured literary composition. It only becomes a work of art intermittently, that is, in its interaction with an interpreter. Unlike spoken discourse, which is simultaneously event and meaning and which ceases as meaning when the event of speaking ends, the written text endures as art object. In other words, it endures as the structure of ideal meaning even when the event of communication is in abeyance. This perdurance of the art object, of the text, not only assures the possibility of the text's becoming meaningful in a subsequent event of interpretation but also maintains the identity of its ideal meaning from one event of interpretation to the next. Thus, even though biblical revelation in the strict sense of the term is an event of interaction between God and the human reader mediated by the text, one can speak of the revelatory text even when it is not being interpreted, the way one can speak of the Mona Lisa as a great painting even when it is not being contemplated.[24]

The character of the text as written discourse also grounds the use of enlightening artistic analogies for understanding how the biblical text functions as revelatory text. Each of the three analogies, the visual, the auditory, and the dramatic, opens up an aspect of the text as revelatory. The **visual** analogy is evoked by referring to the biblical text as a "verbal icon."[25] The icon in the Eastern religious world is not merely a representational painting or an abstract expression but rather a highly stylized symbolic re-presentation of a mystery.[26] The icon does not picture the mystery but mediates it through a combination of traditional colors, forms, and motifs that enable the meaning of the mystery in its universality to shine forth in the particularity of the image and thus initiate the viewer into a mystery that is both intimately experienced and transcendent. The biblical text, especially the gospels, has this same character. Each of the gospels takes up the traditional stories, motifs, and sayings of the Jesus tradition, constructs them into an artistic whole, and holds them before the reader in such a way that the transcendent mystery of the Christ shines forth in the particularity of the Jesus of history. This literary icon might be called the "textual Jesus," by which I mean the proclaimed Jesus (as explained in chapter 4) insofar as this construction of the paschal imagination is presented in literary form.

Invoking the **auditory** analogy, one can compare the biblical text to a musical score.[27] The score is not, strictly speaking, music. It is the normative possibility of music. It becomes music when it is played, and every playing is an interpretation that is not identical with any other interpretation. Nevertheless, artistic interpretation is normed by the score so that all adequate interpretations so resemble each other that the identity of the piece is clear. Interpretations are innumerable, but not all interpretations are valid, nor are all valid interpretations equally good. The same is true in respect to the biblical text. The text is not itself Gospel. It becomes actually revelatory only in the act of interpretation.[28] Although the interpretations are numerous and various, they are normed by the text, by the ideal meaning built into the text by the act of composition. Note, the ideal meaning is not equivalent or reducible to (although it includes) the "intention of the author" but is the effect of composition, of the structuring of the text into a literary work. As any writer knows, a literary work may exceed or fall short of authorial intention but rarely is it perfectly coterminous with that intention.

Finally, invoking the **dramatic** analogy, one can liken the text to a play, a drama whose script allows it to be performed repeatedly and in endless variety of interpretation.[29] Characteristic of the play is its capacity to create a world in which the players cease to be themselves and enter into the roles, that is, "create" the characters whom they play. This world has its own structure, its own rules, its own action, its own relations. If the spectators remain aware that the actors are acting, that is, if they are not drawn completely into the dramatic world to such an extent that they see only the characters and the action of the play, the play has failed. The biblical text also creates a world with its own dynamics, and the interpreter is drawn into this world to find her or his identity in a reality that challenges, that sometimes even replaces, the reality of "this world." When the world of the Gospel so becomes the world of the reader that she or he becomes permanently "part of the play" we speak of conversion.

The biblical text as icon is mediator of mystery and meaning; as musical score it is the normative possibility of endless faithful but original interpretation; as play it is a world of existential possibility called discipleship. These analogies suggest themselves because the biblical text is written discourse, a work, a structured composition in which form and content are wedded to engage the reader with compelling existential truth. In other words, scripture as written discourse is an art object that emerges as work of art in the act of interpretation.

e. The Text as Classic

A final feature of the biblical text that derives from its character as written discourse is its status as a classic, which both justifies and grounds the continuous interpretive effort that raises the hermeneutical question.[30] Obviously, not every written composition remains relevant centuries, or even a few years, after its appearance. Most literary productions, in other words, are not works of art. They are so reflective of and bound to the immediate circumstances of their production, including intrinsically limited subject matter, that they are period pieces. Shortly after their appearance they are no longer interesting or significant.

The classic text is one whose subject matter is somehow universal, whose composition is singularly effective, and whose style is beautiful to such an extent that the work is relevant to the human situation as such. In the case of the New Testament it is the significance of the subject matter that is primarily responsible for its perennial importance in the Christian community. However, not all gospels written during the first century achieved canonical status. The four that did owe their role as Christian classics not only to their subject matter but to their treatment of that matter, that is, to their composition. Continuing engagement with the classic text is justified by its universal significance, by which it transcends its own setting, but this engagement is dependent upon the interpretation that enables the text to find voice in new and changed circumstances.

Classics, although transcendent and therefore potentially universal, are also embedded in particular traditions that deeply mark them. We speak of Greek classics and Chinese classics and Christian classics. They bring the universally human to articulation within the categories and according to the sensibilities of a particular culture, within a particular symbolic universe, in the idiom of a particular language. Unlike the period piece, the classic is not imprisoned in its culture or its historical period, but neither can it be abstracted from its cultural tradition. The interpretive effort, therefore, is not only justified but required, because the immediacy of the classic's content to succeeding generations and foreign cultures is restrained, even impeded, by its cultural form.

Finally, the ongoing interpretation of the classic, which is both justified and necessary, cannot be reduced to decoding, that is, to deciphering the language of the ancient text. This is necessary in order to rejoin its sense and reference, that is, its ideal meaning. But the classic text is classic precisely because it does not merely convey information but affects existentially the life of its readers. In other words, interpretation of the classic is engagement with its truth claims, which remain relevant to succeeding generations of readers. The classic must be not only deciphered, that is, translated and exegeted, not only "replayed," that is, criticized; it must also be recontextualized in the present situation and appropriated. Hermeneutics is concerned with the process of drawing an ancient text forward into the present not as a relic of past ages but as the bearer of existential possibilities for the present.[31]

It is the New Testament text's status as a *classic*, indeed as *the* religious classic of Christianity, that grounds, justifies, and necessitates the hermeneutical engagement with this text. The hermeneutical question arises precisely because this text remains important and even normative for Christian faith. As *written discourse* the text, on the one hand, is distanced from and transcends its original conditions of composition and, on the other hand, remains conditioned by the constraints of the particularities of its composition. As a *structured composition* it carries an ideal meaning that demands to be engaged as real meaning. As *art object* it is the bearer of truth that only reaches its interlocutor in its actualization as work of art. Because all of these features deriving from the text's linguistic, inscribed, and constructed character operate simultaneously, the interpretive project involves a highly complex process of exegesis, criticism, and hermeneutical appropriation. Interpretation in the fullest sense of the word is achieved only when this entire process has taken place.

D. Methodology and the Revelatory Text

In the previous chapter we examined the "world behind the text," a rubric for talking about the relation of the text to its subject matter considered as rooted in history. Specifically, we were concerned with the relation of the New Testament text to Jesus of Nazareth: the real individual (the *actual* earthly Jesus), the literary construct of that individual (the *historical* Jesus), and the Jesus-image offered to faith (the *proclaimed* Jesus). In the present chapter we have inquired into the "world of the text," a rubric for talking about the content of the text as witness and the form of the text as linguistic and textual. Thus, our concern has been with the proclaimed Jesus as presented in written discourse (the *textual* Jesus). In both chapters I have tried to bracket (without ignoring) the issue of the "world in front of the text," that is, the engagement of the reader with the subject matter of the text, the interaction between text and reader as medium of interaction between the reader and the actual glorified Jesus, the Christ of contemporary faith experience.

This division of considerations is not arbitrary, but it is certainly, at least to some extent, artificial, since the text is unitary and the hermeneutical process cannot be neatly divided into mutually exclusive and chronologically successive methodological moments. However, the analysis of the New Testament text as grounded in but transcendent of history in chapter 4 allowed us to conclude that only a methodologically pluralistic approach (rather than a monolithically historical one) will facilitate access to the "world behind the text."

In this chapter the consideration of the New Testament as testimony and text leads to the parallel and complementary conclusion: that a potentially innumerable multiplicity of interpretations, far from indicating that the interpretive project has disintegrated in confusion, is demanded by the surplus of meaning that characterizes a text as text. However, it also belongs to the nature of the text as text (as art object and classic) that it constitutes an objective pole of interpretation and therefore that it is possible to elaborate criteria of validity that allow for adjudication among interpretations. Furthermore, because the New Testament text is specifically a case of witness to historical and transhistorical events and their significance, the objective pole is precisely the locus of the connection of this text as text to its subject matter, the historical Jesus proclaimed as the Christ.

The material presented in this and the previous chapter intends to suggest an approach to methodology that begins not with the available methods but with the questions of the interpreter.[32] In other words, a research project does not begin by classifying the methodological approaches, choosing one, and attempting to operate according to its canons. Rather, the interpretive project begins with the proper formulation of the questions one wishes to ask of the text and the selection, from the repertoire of methods, of those that are useful for eliciting from the text the material for answering those questions. The resulting methodology, which of necessity will be pluralistic, will also be unique to the research project at hand, even though the individual methods employed are the commonly employed tools of biblical scholarship.

Because the biblical text is essentially witness borne to historical and transhistorical events in and through which a privileged experience of divine revelation occurred and to the continuing significance of those events as mediation of revelation in the present, all biblical interpretation will involve an **historical moment.** Although the historical material may not be the primary concern within a particular project, there can be no bypassing of the issues with which historical criticism deals: the identity and credibility of the witnesses; the adequacy and accuracy of the testimony; the limitations involved in the testifying; and the actual historical material of the testimony itself.

Second, because the biblical text is a linguistic entity, **literary methods** must play a role in any interpretative process. Again, literary features may be of more or less importance in relation to a particular question, but the primary medium of biblical revelation is the text, and the text is always and only a reality of language. The character of language as the finite "said" against the enormous background of the "unsaid," the fact that language is symbolic activity and that most nonscientific language is metaphorical to some extent, and the shaping of the biblical material by genre and style affect decisively any interpretive project.

Third, as researchers become increasingly aware of the role of the **reader/hearer** in the making of meaning, newer methods (sociological, psychological, rhetorical, ideological, etc.) bearing specifically on the audience will undoubtedly assume greater importance in biblical research.

But it is the fourth feature of the biblical text, namely, the fact that it is a text, a **linguistic work,** that plays the controlling role in the methodological structuring of any interpretive project. As we have seen, the effect of inscription is to cut written discourse loose from the constraints of its originating situation including the intention of the author, the receptive capacity of the original audience, and the contextual coordinates of composition. This renders the text semantically autonomous, available to an endless succession of readers, and susceptible of incessant recontextualization. These characteristics of the text as text account for what has been called the surplus of meaning of the text. Every text means more and other than it meant at its creation. Classic texts, those that survive the period of their creation, generate an effective history that becomes part of and therefore modifies and enriches their meaning. And all classical texts will continue to be interpreted by successive generations of diverse reading publics, who will interact with the text from different contexts and perspectives.

Consequently, there is no such thing as *the* one correct interpretation of a text. Texts are susceptible of endless new interpretations as different interpreters, with different questions and different backgrounds, interrogate the text about its subject matter. Thus, there is also no one correct method or constellation of methods for interpreting a text. The questions that can be addressed to the text, although they all bear upon its subject matter, are virtually infinite in number. No answer, that is, no interpretive result, will be *the* final and definitive interpretation of the text. Criteria must be developed for adjudicating among rival interpretations of the same text in relation to the same question and for assessing the adequacy of any given interpretation, but the questioning will go on.

The implication of the surplus of meaning is both methodological pluralism and multiplicity of interpretations and therefore the relative methodological uniqueness of each interpretive project. Nevertheless, all textually oriented interpretive projects will necessarily involve, whether implicitly or explicitly, three moments: the exegetical, the critical, and the hermeneutical. Historical methods will dominate in the exegetical moment in which the issue is the establishment of the ideal meaning of the text: what the text is about (reference) and what the text says about the referent (sense). Literary methods will dominate in the critical moment where the issue is what the text is doing, how it does it, and whether it does it well or badly. The hermeneutical moment, as we will see in the next chapter, involves the dialectic of explanation (the work of exegesis and criticism) with understanding, which is the work of theology and spirituality integrating the encounter with Jesus as the Christ in and through the revelatory text within the existential horizon of the individual and the community.

Methodology, therefore, in the area of biblical studies can no longer be envisioned as a single, complete, adequate approach (such as traditional historical criticism) valid for all texts. Furthermore, no single student can master even all the essential methods of biblical research, much less the more exotic or esoteric ones, because they are not only too numerous and too complicated but they are constantly multiplying as new aspects and dimensions of texts are discovered and articulated. Once the student is equipped with the basic methods of exegesis and criticism, including a knowledge of the original languages of the texts, she or he will go on to specialize in some area(s) of biblical research and will become proficient in the use of those methods most appropriate for research in that area. In this scholarly situation an adequate hermeneutical theory, that is, an adequate theoretical framework for understanding the task of interpretation, becomes essential, for it is within that framework that the student will learn to rightly formulate research questions, to construct the methodological approach for investigation, to assess the adequacy of the results obtained, and to recognize the necessity for complementing her or his limited approach with the work of other scholars taking different approaches to the same text and/or employing different methodologies.

When Gadamer entitled his masterwork *Truth and Method,* he was actually challenging the domination, especially in humanistic research, of concern for truth by technical method. To start with the method(s) is to determine a priori what questions may be asked and what will count as data and evidence. By contrast, to start with the question is to root one's research in the open search for truth. Method remains necessary, but it will be developed in function of the question, not the other way around. The Cartesian ideal of the clear and distinct idea gave birth to the nineteenth-century obsession with method, which resulted in scientism and positivism, from which not only the humanities, including biblical scholarship, but also the sciences are slowly disentangling themselves. Returning biblical research to its true role as servant of the revelatory text and facilitator of salvific encounter with the Christ-event in Jesus is part of that disentanglement.

Notes

1. Gadamer calls part 3 of *TM* "The Ontological Shift of Hermeneutics Guided by Language" and argues therein for the essentially linguistic character of human being, and "that language is the medium where I and the world meet" (p. 474). The new ontological as opposed to instrumental understanding of language has deeply affected all humanistic study, including theology, in the last half century.

2. I am indebted for much stimulation in my reflection on witness to Paul Ricoeur's article "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," available in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and introd. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 119-154.
3. I take up this question in *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1991), pp. 37-71. The notes on pp. 120-123 supply some introductory bibliography on the subject.
4. Although Raymond Brown thinks it is dangerous to avoid calling the resurrection an historical event, he speaks of language breaking down in the effort to handle what I have called transhistorical events and Brown calls eschatological events (*The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* [New York: Paulist, 1973]), pp. 82-92.
5. Of primary importance in this development is the work of Amos N. Wilder, Robert Funk, Norman Perrin, and the New Hermeneuts, whose works have been cited in the last chapter.
6. Cf. *TM*, pp. 456-474.
7. I am dependent here on the distinction of Philip Wheelwright (cf. *Metaphor and Reality* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968], pp. 32-69) between steno-language and tensive language, complemented by Paul Ricoeur's distinction (cf. *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan [Boston: Beacon, 1969], pp. 10-18) between sign and symbol, both of which are explained briefly in relation to the New Testament language of the reign of God in Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 29-32.
8. Contemporary biblical scholarship owes to Amos N. Wilder the raising to visibility of this understanding of the nature of Jesus' language as it is presented in the gospels. See esp. his *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), originally published in 1964, and *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scriptures*, ed. and pref. James Breech (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), which contains a collection of Wilder's essays on this subject written between 1959 and 1974. The preface, "The Operations of the Imagination and the Heart: Amos Wilder's Rhetorical Interpretation," pp. 1-14, is an excellent introduction to Wilder's work and Wilder's own preface, pp. 15-38, is a good summary of the history of the entrance of genuine literary study into contemporary biblical scholarship and its productive union with historical study.
9. See *TM*, esp. pp. 362-379, 383-389.
10. Cf. *IT*, esp. pp. 22-23, 34-37. The famous line "Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends" occurs on p. 32.
11. *TM*, pp. 362-379.
12. *TM*, pp. 387-388.
13. *TM*, pp. 369-379.
14. Ricoeur explains this point fully in "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," *HHS:* 131-141. He treats the subject very briefly in *IT*, pp. 43-44.
15. For the background of this section, see *IT*, esp. pp. 25-44.
16. Recall the sentence quoted in the previous chapter, viz., John L. McKenzie's claim ("Problems of Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Exegesis," *JBL* 77 [1958], p. 199) that "if all scholars were perfectly objective, entire unanimity should be theoretically possible in exegesis itself; for the meaning of the Bible has been determined by its authors, not by its interpreters."
17. For a brief overview of the history of "more than literal interpretation" and basic bibliography on the subject, see Raymond E. Brown and Sandra M. Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," *NJBC* 71:30-77.
18. Roland E. Murphy briefly traces the career of this book of the Old Testament in "The Song of Songs: Critical Biblical Scholarship Vis-à-vis Exegetical Traditions," in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson*, ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad, Ben C. Ollenberger, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series 37 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), pp. 63-69. Murphy explains both what exegesis of the Song of Songs has established and the effect of a long and complicated history of appropriation by both the Jewish and Christian communities. For a fuller explanation, see his *The Song of Songs* in Hermeneia Commentary Series (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), esp. pp. 11-41, 50-57, 91-105.
19. See *IT*, esp. pp. 19-22. For a much fuller presentation, see "What Is a Text?: Explanation and Understanding," *HHS:* 145-164.
20. See Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics," *HHS*, esp. pp. 176-181.
21. Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics," p. 177.

22. See *IT*, pp. 40–43, on writing and the iconicity of the text.
23. See *TM* part 1, chapter 2, pp. 101–169, on "The Ontology of the Work of Art and Its Hermeneutic Significance."
24. See Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1968), pp. 256–266, on the analogy between the modes of being of art and of revelation.
25. *IT*, pp. 40–43.
26. A remarkable treatment of this subject is the section "La théologie de l'icône," in Paul Evdokimov, *L'Art de l'icône: Théologie de la beauté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1970), pp. 141–201. Available in English as *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood, 1990).
27. See my article, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," *TS* 39 (December 1978): 719–736, where I develop this analogy at some length.
28. See Hart, *Unfinished Man*, pp. 103–104, for an especially clear explanation of this point.
29. Cf. *TM*, pp. 101–129.
30. The seminal suggestion that the "classical" is a fundamental category for hermeneutics was made by Gadamer in *TM*, pp. 285–290, but has been taken up and extended by David Tracy in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 99–229, and most recently by Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 133–142.
31. See Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation," *HHS:* 182–193.
32. The hermeneutic priority of question to method is Gadamer's central thesis (see, esp., *TM*, pp. 362–379).

6

The World Before The Text: Meaning, Appropriation, and the Revelatory Text

Having considered the relation of the text to its subject matter and the nature of the text as text we come finally to the issue of how text and reader interact in the experience of biblical revelation. In proleptic summary, the reader by means of interpretation enters into and appropriates the world of meaning that the text projects and is thereby changed. Each element of this proposition, namely, interpretation, the world the text projects, and the process and result of appropriation, must be explored in detail.

A. Interpretation

Interpretation, the subject matter of the generalized theory called hermeneutics, is a slippery term because it can refer both to a process and to a product. We speak of the act of interpretation of a text but also of having achieved an interpretation. Consequently, for purposes of clarity I propose to examine interpretation under each of the two headings.

1. Interpretation as Process: The Dialectic of Explanation and Understanding

Paul Ricoeur describes the process of interpretation as a dialectic between explanation and understanding, between the use of methods to clarify the sense-reference content of the text and the holistic assimilation of that content as expansion of one's being, one's subjectivity.[1] The process actually begins, as hermeneutical theorists since Heidegger have insisted, in preunderstanding, which is then subjected to scrutiny through investigative methods that correct and expand the preunderstanding into the meaning that is finally understood.

Preunderstanding is the basis for the initiating guess at meaning that sets the process of interpretation into motion. This is not a wild guess but an educated guess or a hypothesis about what the text means, without which there would be no basis for planning or executing a methodical process of investigation and testing, that is, explanation. As Ricoeur says, there are no rules for guessing.[2] In the initial encounter with the text the reader, operating from what she or he already knows, comes to some understanding of what the text is about and what it says. As we will see, the quality and content of consciousness that enables this originating hypothesis about the meaning of the text is both complex and subject to scrutiny, but without it no entrance into the meaning of the text is possible. Confronted by a text in a language of which I am totally ignorant, for example, I am paralyzed. But, even if I understand the language, if the subject matter is totally foreign to me, I can proceed no further. Preunderstanding of some sort is the sine qua non of interpretation, and the initial guess at meaning, based in the preunderstanding, is the first moment of the interpretive process.

Explanation is the process of more or less methodical interrogation of the text through techniques of investigation.[3] In the case of the New Testament text, as we have already seen, this interrogation involves exegesis and criticism in which historical, literary, and other types of methods are used to understand the "world behind the text" and the "world of the text." Finally, in processes that have traditionally been brought together under the term *Sachkritik*[4] and that today include both theological and ideological criticism, the text's discursive subject matter (i.e., what it says about its ultimate subject matter, the proclaimed Jesus) is interrogated in order to bring into view the "world before the text," a subject to which we will return in the next section.

Explanation offers to the reader of the text a possibility of understanding that is usually partial and inadequate. This, in turn, raises further questions to be investigated methodically until the dialectical alternation between explanation and understanding comes to rest in an experience of meaning that is satisfactory and that we will finally call, following Ricoeur, appropriation or, as I prefer, transformative understanding. It is the capacity of understanding to transform the person that grounds the possibility of the biblical text functioning as revelatory medium. Consequently, the nature of understanding is of primary importance for our inquiry.

Understanding is the goal of the process of interpretation in two closely related senses of the word *goal:* an epistemological sense and an ontological sense. *Epistemologically,* understanding is one pole of the dialectic of interpretation that we have just considered. When the dialectic between explanation and understanding has achieved itself, the mind comes to rest in understanding, that is, in the experience of meaning. However, as Gadamer has insisted, understanding in this sense of the word is secondary to a more fundamental *ontological* sense of understanding as the characteristic mode of being of the human existent. To be in the world as human is precisely to understand. Consequently, to come to understanding in the epistemological sense is to be modified ontologically, in one's very being, that is, to be transformed existentially.

Understanding in this ontological sense, that is, not as a moment in the process of coming to know but as the characteristic mode of human being, is the subject matter of hermeneutics considered not as a theory of interpreting texts (or other manifestations of reality) but as an ontology of the human. Gadamer, following Heidegger, has contributed the major impulse in this century to reflection on the nature of understanding as the distinguishing mode of human being. His contribution has been crucial in the emergence of a postpositivist approach to humanistic inquiry.

Of central importance for such a postpositivist theory of understanding is Gadamer's conception of effective history and effective historical consciousness, which we considered briefly in chapter 4 and must now examine more carefully. The operative model of understanding in a positivist framework involved two poles. At one pole was the **object** to be known, which, once posited, remained substantially identical with itself and epistemologically "stationary" through successive acts of knowing to which it was subjected. At the other pole was the knowing **subject**, who, by scientific method, could operate cognitively upon the object without influencing it. In other words, through the rigorous use of method the knower could approach the free-standing object with a mind that was virtually tabula rasa in regard to the object and could come to know it "as it is" without contaminating or distorting objective knowledge (the scientific ideal) with "subjectivity."[5] In the sphere of historical research this gave rise to the ideal of knowing the past "as it really was" or "as it really happened." This positivistic historical ideal certainly controlled biblical scholarship through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What Gadamer has helped us to see is that the mind is not a pure capacity for the intelligible but itself an historical reality shaped by the tradition within which it participates. The language in which we think, the culture in which we participate, the education both formal and informal that shapes our questioning, in short, all the effects of history *on* our intelligence influence the process of knowing and the resulting understanding. This is what has been called historical consciousness, an ever-changing involvement of the consciousness of the knower in the flow of history that makes it impossible for the knower to assume a transcendent, stationary, detached point of view from which to observe some detached or free-standing object of knowledge.

Furthermore, our historical consciousness does not encounter a free-standing "objective" knowable, for example, the past "as it was," because the past is not a detached stationary object. Whatever of the past is known is known only in the present, therefore as shaped by its passage through history from its initiating occurrence to the present. By "effective history" is meant historical reality not only as initiating event but also as modified and amplified by all that the initiating event has produced.

By way of example, we Americans cannot know the Vietnam War "as it happened" but only in terms of its own effective history, that is, in terms of all that the Vietnam War has come to be down to today. This effective history includes not only what happened between the deployment of U.S. troops in Southeast Asia and the return of the last bodies, but also the incessant effort to interpret that war through commentary, film, and novel; the victims (those who died, those who returned, and those who loved and lost them) who are still with us in different ways; the shifting attitudes of the American people (of which we are a part), who have alternated between alienating derision and the solemn memorial tolling of names, between denial and macho imitation, in their efforts to deal with this war and those who prosecuted it; the Amerasian orphans, napalm-sterilized countryside, and drug-ridden veterans screaming in the night as they relive their own inhumanity and the violence done to them; and the high ambivalence about never getting involved in another such war that fuels both antiwar sentiment in general and a strange compulsion to fight a "decisive" war that will somehow resolve the one we left without winning.

The Vietnam War, in short, is not simply what happened between the first and last officially mandated shot but the effective history that the war-as-fought has generated. We can only understand what really happened between the first and last shot in and through and in terms of all that the war produced and continues to produce. The war, in other words, is not one isolated event or collection of events firmly located "in the past." It is a reality that goes on into the present, all of whose elements are mutually interactive. The past is not ontologically or epistemologically stationary; it is constantly being reconstituted within its own effective history.

Understanding, then, in the ontological sense of the term, is the mutual indwelling of effective history and historical consciousness producing what Gadamer called "effective historical consciousness," which is the characteristically human mode of being in the world.[6] This means that understanding, in the epistemological sense of the term, is not the methodologically antiseptic grasp by an objective mind of a free-standing knowable resulting in "objective knowledge."

What Gadamer called "application" (an unfortunate term in some ways) refers to the fact that the knower, in all her or his historical density, is always implicated in the knowing and therefore in the known. The so-called hard sciences themselves have come to realize that even the most carefully controlled laboratory experiment cannot factor out the knower/observer from either the process or the result of the experiment.[7]

In the area of humanistic understanding the role of the knower in the process of understanding is even more integral. One can only truly understand something as "applied," that is, as integrated into one's own world of meaning (one's understanding in the ontological sense).[8] In other words, we only really understand that which has been integrated into reality within the horizon of effective historical consciousness because that is the only consciousness we have. "Application" unfortunately suggests the affixing of one complete substance (like a decal) to another complete substance (like a window), but what it means in the hermeneutical context is that the known, if it is really understood and not simply added to a collection of facts, is always known in and through the experienced historical consciousness of the knower and in relation to everything else that is known, never "in itself."

Both jurisprudence and speculative theology have been offered as clarifying instances of the "applied" character of true understanding.[9] One does not really know what a law means, that is, one does not really understand it, unless one sees how it functions in relation to the case under consideration, which is, of course, not the case in terms of which the law was formulated. One does not understand theologically a datum of faith, for example, salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection, unless one sees what it means in terms of the people (including oneself) who inhabit one's own historical situation, which is quite different from the situation in which Jesus' paschal mystery originally occurred.

It is understanding in the full sense of the term, an understanding that does not demand fuller explanation in order for the meaning to be grasped and that expands the existential reality of the knower, that is the goal of interpretation as a process. That which is understood, that is, the product of interpretation, is meaning that is itself a multileveled reality.

2. Interpretation as Product: Meaning

The aim of interpretation is meaning. Understanding is the grasp of meaning. But what is meaning? Meaning, like existence or experience, is so close to us and so pervasive in our experience as nearly to defy definition. However, Ricoeur's definition of meaning as the dialectic between sense (what is said) and reference (what it is said about) will serve as a designation of meaning considered as *content,* which is our concern at the moment. In its most complete sense, however, meaning should be considered an *event that perdures* in and through transformative appropriation. This sense of the term will be deferred to the third and final part of this chapter.

The meaning with which we are concerned here is the meaning of the text, or *textual meaning,* which involves both the ideal meaning of the **text as language** and the meaning of the text as a **literary work.** These two levels of meaning cannot really be separated in the actual process of textual interpretation, but they can be distinguished for purposes of clarity.

The primary object of exegesis as such is the ideal meaning of the text, that is, what it actually says about its immanent referent. The primary object of literary criticism is to understand how the text operates to engage the reader with the ideal meaning not as ideal (i.e., formal) but as existential (i.e., as truth claim). By way of example, exegesis aims to discover whether Jesus actually told the parable of the Good Samaritan, what kinds of relations obtained between Jews and Samaritans, who Levites and priests were, what the Law demanded in cases of this sort, and so on. It aims to clarify what the text says about its referent. Literary analysis is concerned with how the parable functions to engage the hearer or reader, to subvert the world of the reader by challenging her or him to a renewed view of reality and a new way of being and acting. Together, ideal meaning and the meaning of the work constitute what may be called textual meaning.

I am proposing that the term *textual meaning* replace what has been called, in the context of a more positivistic understanding of interpretation, "the literal meaning." It is nearly impossible to find an enlightening definition of literal meaning. At its origin the term derived from the Latin for "letter," and literal meaning was the meaning of the words in the text. Even in the patristic era this understanding led at times to such untenable conclusions about the meaning of texts that it had to be rejected or sublimated in the interests of theology, morality, and spirituality. In fact, words, strictly speaking, do not mean at all. They only take on significance in context. The minimal context is the lexicon, where a word has some significance in reciprocal relation to the other words in the same language system within which each word in the system is defined by its relation to all the others. Words become genuinely significant only in the context of the proposition that determines the polysemy of the word sufficiently for it to become meaningful. For example, *bow* does not really mean anything until one sees whether it is part of the sentence "She shot her bow," or, "He was wearing a blue bow tie," or, "A shot was fired over the bow of the ship."

More sophisticated proponents of a literal sense have sometimes equated it not with the sense of words, either in isolation or in context, but with the "plain sense" of the text, that is, with the straightforward meaning of the text that can be understood by anyone able to read the language. For all the reasons evoked in talking about the text as a linguistic entity and a work of art, it must be acknowledged that texts, especially literary texts written in and referring to distant times and cultures and originally written in languages foreign to the reader, often do not present a "plain sense." That is why translation, exegesis, and criticism are necessary.

Finally, literal sense has been equated in modern times with "the sense intended by the author," or what some scholars have called the "literary sense" (which is confusing because of the multiple ways in which the term *literary* is used today). While this is some improvement because it allows a parable or metaphor, for example, to be understood as figurative, and the unconscious or unintended reflection in the text of the author's scientific or cultural milieu to be judged erroneous without calling into question the truth of the literal sense, it is still inadequate. As we have already seen, the author's intention is not actually available to the reader once the author can no longer be interrogated. The semantic autonomy of the text resides in the fact that the text means what it says, regardless of what the author intended to say. Appeal to the meaning intended by the author is not only impossible in fact but undesirable in principle, since it would greatly limit the potential richness of meaning of the text. But, above all, it is not necessary, because the role of objective pole of interpretation can be filled by the ideal meaning of the text itself, obviating the necessity to posit authorial intention as a control on potentially fantastic interpretation.[10]

Textual meaning, on the other hand, both provides an objective pole of interpretation (ideal meaning) and opens the text to meaning all that it can mean (meaning of the work). At the same time it obviates the need to appeal to a "more than literal sense" in order to account for the richness produced by ongoing interpretation. In virtue of the text's relative semantic autonomy and freedom from the coordinates of its composition, the textual meaning entails both a surplus of meaning and susceptibility to recontextualization. Therefore, the text always actually means something other than, and in the case of a classic, more than, its author could have intended or its original audience could have understood. The text, in virtue of its character as text, means all that it can mean, which is potentially unlimited. One need not deny divine influence on the text, which renders it spiritually effective for successive generations (inspiration), but one need not appeal to supernatural explanations to account for *how* textual meaning transcends the text's so-called original meaning.[11]

A final advantage of replacing a theory of literal meaning with the theory of textual meaning is that this allows for a reasoned approach to the interpretive issue of "accommodation." The biblical text has always been used in a so-called accommodated sense in the homiletic and pastoral tradition of the Church, and often enough in its theological tradition. Accommodation refers to the use of a text independently of its *con*-text. Thus, by definition, accommodated meaning is not textual meaning. Once this is clear, the question about whether or not accommodation is legitimate can be focused accurately.

It would seem that two criteria must be applied in judging the validity of an accommodated interpretation of a text. The first is whether the text *can legitimately be removed* from its original context without distorting its sense or destroying its reference; the second is whether the new context into which it is inserted is *susceptible of receiving* it and being illuminated by it.

What allows a text to be legitimately removed from its original context is its intrinsic universality, at least in respect to a certain range of reality. When, for example, the Johannine Jesus told his wavering Jewish hearers that if they remained in his word they would become his disciples and they would know the truth and the truth would make them free (John 8:31–32), he was talking about acceptance of his word as personal union with himself, the Truth incarnate, resulting in the true freedom of being a child of God as opposed to a purely formal freedom as a biological child of Abraham. However, "the truth will make you free," one of the most accommodated texts in religious literature, has a universal validity that generation after generation, regardless of faith commitment or religious affiliation, has recognized. Whether in the realm of interpersonal relations, political engagements, or the spiritual life, error and lying lead to entanglement and slavery while truth, however painful, leads to freedom and life. The accommodation of this text has almost always been legitimate and illuminating, even when it has been used in contexts virtually totally devoid of religious, much less Christian, concerns.

However, many if not most texts are not universal in meaning and either cannot be taken from their respective contexts or cannot legitimately be inserted into other contexts, or both. For example, when the Johannine Jesus, in argument with some Jewish leaders who appealed to Abrahamic descent to legitimate their claims to divine approval even though they were not acting according to the faith of Abraham, accused them of being children of their father the devil who was a liar from the beginning (John 8:39–47), he was speaking to particular Jews, not in principle or by extension to all Jews, in terms of their personal moral and religious failure, not in terms of their Jewish identity. To take this line of Jesus out of context and apply it to all Jews of all time to justify anti-Semitism is not legitimate accommodation because the text cannot be meaningfully abstracted from its context without destroying its reference, and it cannot be applied to all Jews without violating its basic meaning.

Not all cases of proposed accommodation are as clear as these two, and much accommodation, even when not particularly apt, is relatively harmless, but the basic principles for assessing the legitimacy of accommodation apply. Accommodation involves an alternative to textual meaning, and the question of legitimacy bears upon the possibility of the text retaining its (or a) true meaning outside its context (at least relative universality) and the actual validity of its insertion into a different context (basic continuity between its textual meaning and the accommodated meaning).

3. Criteria of Valid Interpretation

The final question, and the most crucial, regarding the meaning that results from interpretation concerns the criteria of validity. How do we know when a text has been validly interpreted, that is, when we have reached genuine textual meaning? The question does not concern *correct* meaning, because, as has been said several times, there is no single meaning that alone corresponds to and constitutes the meaning of the text. Multiple interpretations are not only possible but demanded by the very nature of the text as text. The question then concerns *validity.* Although there is potentially an unlimited number of valid interpretations for a given text, not all interpretations are valid, and some valid interpretations are better than others. If approximation to or correspondence of the interpretation to a supposedly univocal intention of the author is not the criterion of validity, what criteria are available?

Let me propose, first of all, *two global criteria,* one negative and one positive, before going on to specific ones. Negatively, an interpretation has a chance of being valid if the process meets the standard: **that which cannot be done or left undone.** There are some things, some exegetical processes, for example, that cannot be legitimately applied to some texts. One cannot determine the meaning of a lyric poem, for example, by determining whether its affirmations about its subject matter are historically verifiable. And there are other things that may not be left undone. For example, one cannot interpret certain prophetic oracles in the Old Testament without situating them in their historical context. Part of acquiring competence as a biblical scholar is learning both what must be done and what may not be done in relation to different kinds of texts.

A positive global criterion is the **fruitfulness** of the interpretation. This is the criterion many traditional exegetes applied (perhaps prematurely) to the first products of structuralist analysis. If the critic has expended enormous energy and used extravagantly complex techniques to arrive at what anyone reading the text would have understood anyway, one might question, if not the validity, at least the value of such an interpretive enterprise. But more importantly, if an interpretation renders the text meaningless or banal, especially if the text has a history of significance, one suspects the validity of the interpretation.[12] On the other hand, an interpretation, even if new or startling, that "makes the text speak," that, for example, exploits the potentiality of the text to illuminate the faith of the community without violating the canons of good exegetical and critical method, should be taken seriously.[13] This is actually the global criterion to which some forms of sociological, psychological, and liberationist interpretation are appealing at the present time.

As Ricoeur has suggested, following E. D. Hirsch on this point, the process of testing the validity of interpretation is actually a logic of probability rather than a logic of verification, and it consists in a convergence of indices (*specific criteria*) rather than apodictic demonstration.[14] Indeed, this is the type of validation appropriate for a "science of the individual" (the text being a "quasi-individual") as opposed to a science of the universal. The object of the argumentation is not to demonstrate the certitude of one's conclusions but to demonstrate the relative adequacy of one's interpretation. The question, then, is which indices, if they converge, help to establish the relative adequacy of an interpretation and help to adjudicate among incompatible interpretations.

Without attempting an exhaustive list, I will suggest some types of indices or criteria that are useful. First, a valid interpretation should **account for the text as it stands** or establish, independently of the proposed interpretation, why and how it should be emended. In other words, emendation designed to make the text fit the interpretation rather than the other way around always opens an interpretation to question. Seemingly gratuitous rearrangement and emendation of the biblical text, which reached fever pitch in the early decades of this century, is almost always regarded with suspicion today.

Second, a valid interpretation has to be **consistent with itself,** that is, free from internal contradictions. Furthermore, the type of interpretation proposed should be **used integrally** and be **valid for the text as a whole and the whole of the text.** Mary Ann Tolbert, in her book on parables, compares, for example, two basically psychoanalytic interpretations of the parable of the Prodigal Son, demonstrating the superiority of one interpretation to the other because the former does a better job of respecting both the integrity of the interpreter's model and the integrity of the text.[15]

Third, a valid interpretation should be equally as or more successful than its competitors at **explaining anomalies** in the text. If, for example, a certain interpretation can make sense of a seemingly anomalous text within the overall theology of the gospel in which it occurs, that interpretation is preferable to one that must regard the anomalous text as an interpolation or as the result of a clumsy redaction.

Fourth, a valid interpretation ought to be **compatible with what is known from other sources,** both biblical and extrabiblical. For example, in view of the texts in John's gospel referring to the expulsion of believers in Jesus from the synagogue (e.g., John 9:22), something that did not happen until after 85 or 90 C.E., an interpretation of the fourth gospel as a document predating the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. is highly questionable.

Finally, a valid interpretation should have **used responsibly all the methods that are appropriate** within the framework of interpretation chosen. No interpretation can involve the use of all available methods. It is perfectly legitimate to propose an historical or a feminist or a psychological interpretation of a text. But within the framework selected the appropriate methods should be used responsibly, and it is the task of the interpreter to demonstrate her or his competence within that framework. Someone who proposes to do feminist interpretation, for example, must know feminist theory and methodology and operate responsibly within that context. Conversely, a feminist interpretation cannot be invalidated on the grounds that it is not, for example, primarily historical. It must not misuse historical methods or be incompatible with what can be established by such methods, but it cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it approaches the text differently.

No doubt there are many other criteria of validity that can be and actually are applied in the assessment of various interpretive efforts. Criteria are actually discovered in their application more easily than they can be elaborated in the abstract. One discovers in reading an interpretation what is or is not convincing and illuminating and then raises the question of why. To say that a particular interpretation is not acceptable for such and such a reason is to affirm the existence and applicability of a criterion of validity.

B. The World Before the Text

As has been said several times, interpretation bears on the text, not on what lies behind or outside it. It is through the text that one can discover something of the history that lies behind the text and discern what has been called "the world before the text." The object of interpretation is always and only the text itself. However, the ultimate goal of interpretation, the existential augmentation of the reader, takes place in her or his participation, through the text, in the world before the text. The ultimate objective of reading is enhanced subjectivity, an experience that belongs finally, as we will see, to the sphere of spirituality.

The world behind the text includes everything that cooperates to produce the text, that is, the process of text production (the history of composition) and the subject matter of the text as it took place in the past (the Jesus-event of history). The world of the text consists of the testimony of the participants in the originating events that has been incorporated in the linguistic text. Because the testimony is incorporated into a text, it becomes a work, an artistic entity constructed according to a particular genre, for example, narrative, poetry, proclamation, or discourse. This is the basis of its capacity to "project a world."[16]

A literary work clears a space, creates a world, into which the reader is invited. One difference between a good work and a poor one is that a poor work never quite achieves a total world. One is aware that one is watching a play, or reading a novel. One does not become "lost" in the work. One's everyday world is not suspended and temporarily replaced by the new space, the new relations, the new reality of the work. By contrast, after reading a great novel or seeing a fine play one has the impression of having been in a different world for the duration of the artistic experience. The reader or spectator has experienced a whole range of emotion that is not related to or a response to everyday life. She or he has thought, not about the events and concerns of mundane existence, but about the issues of the novel or the play. One has established relationships with the characters and identified with or rejected the values proposed by the work. One cares deeply about what happens, how the plot works out and is finally resolved. One can come out of a play depressed and in tears or elated and renewed in hope. One has lived a different life, in a different world, and returns to the reality of everyday life changed in some way.

It is important to realize that the "world the text projects" is not the imaginative, fictional world of the work, for example, the land of Oz or the inn to which the Good Samaritan took the victim of the robbers. The fiction is the vehicle that carries the reader into a possible alternative *reality.* This is precisely the dynamic of the parable.

This different world is the world before the text, the world that the text generates and projects and invites the reader to enter. The New Testament as a whole, and each of its parts individually, projects such an alternative world. This world is variously named in the text itself: Paul speaks of living "in the Spirit" rather than in the flesh; John talks of both Jesus and the disciples being "born from above" and living by the Spirit rather than being "of this world," of their abiding "in the Truth" or indwelling his Word; the synoptic gospels present Jesus as inviting his hearers to discern in their midst an alternative sphere called the "reign of God." The reader is challenged to enter this world by becoming a disciple, a hearer of the word, a follower of Jesus. Discipleship is the condition of one who comes to live habitually in the world of New Testament revelation.

The New Testament presents Jesus' first disciples and some of those in the crowds that listened to his preaching as totally caught up in the world he spun out in his parables and aphorisms and discourses. They followed him with enthusiasm, leaving behind all the structures and relations of ordinary life in order to enter into and live according to the coordinates of this new world. The problem of New Testament hermeneutics is precisely how later believers, who do not see and hear the earthly Jesus but encounter him only through the text, who are overfamiliar with the stories and know how they turn out, can experience the invitation into the world before the text that will be as truly transforming for them as it was for those who first heard the parables and followed Jesus.

The stakes of this project are very high. To be drawn into the New Testament world is not to take a brief vacation in a fantasy land before returning to "the real world." Unfortunately, that is how many Christians experience their encounters with the text. They listen to a parable, for example, the Good Samaritan, read in church on Sunday, and they hear the homily preached on the text. For a few moments they glimpse the possibility of a different kind of world, one in which people live as neighbors. But at the end of the service they return to the "real world" in which strife, self-protection, violence, and privatized absorption in one's own affairs are the coordinates of reality. The Gospel is not a possibility for them. They are not really changed by what they have heard, except perhaps to feel a certain yearning or nostalgia for a make-believe world that they wish existed.

To really enter the world before the text, whether that be the world of *Hamlet*, or Emily Dickinson's "The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea," or May Sarton's *The Small Room*, or the world of the fourth gospel, is to be changed, to "come back different," which is a way of saying that one does not come "back" at all but moves forward into a newness of being. From the genuine encounter with the true in the beautiful one cannot go home again. Appropriation, which will be explored shortly, is an experience of conversion by participation in the world before the text. It is the capacity of the work of art to change its participants that grounds the truth of the statement that "the pen is mightier than the sword," not primarily because it can intellectually convince someone of an idea but because through texts (and other art forms) people become different. The challenge of biblical hermeneutics is to understand how this can be allowed to happen in the encounter between the biblical text as Word of God, and the reader or hearer, that is, how the scriptures can become revelatory text.

C. Appropriation:
Transformative Understanding of the Subject Matter of the Text

1. From the First Naïveté to the Second Naïveté

The process of appropriation has been described by Ricoeur as a passage from the first naïveté through criticism to a second naïveté.[17] The first naïveté is a spontaneous immediacy of reader to subject matter through a text that is so totally transparent that one is not aware of its existence, much less any deficiencies it might have. Reading, in our everyday experience, is naive in this sense. When I see a street sign I do not see it as sign but am simply aware, through it, that the street I am driving on is Broadway. My reception of that knowledge is unreflective and uncritical. Such reading is made possible by the reader's and the text's sharing the same tradition. The sign is written in English, has the literary form (one word, capitalized, on a placard, at an intersection, etc.) of a street sign within the culture of the reader, is a recognizable word from the lexicon, and so on.

The child listening to a fairy tale, the member of a preliterate society participating in the ritual reenactment of the founding myths of the tribe, the person caught up in the reading of a novel for sheer enjoyment all experience this immediacy to the subject matter of the text that renders the text itself transparent. But since the Enlightenment modern adult readers, especially when reading significant texts, are very aware of the text itself as not only mediating the subject matter but intervening between them and the subject matter. They raise the question of whether the text is accurately, fairly, honestly, adequately, and so on conveying the subject matter and whether the subject matter itself, in its truth claims, is worthy of acceptance. In short, the modern reader is critical of the text and of its content.

If naïveté is the nearness of the subject matter through a transparent text, criticism is the process of distancing the text. There are two purposes to this distancing: *to protect the reader from the text* and *to protect the text from the reader.* First, criticism distances the text itself in order that one can examine the text in itself and in its relation to the subject matter, and finally the subject matter through the text. In the wake of the "masters of suspicion," Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, the modern mind is suspicious of all that purports to deliver the truth. Criticism is the process of systematically sifting the text for error and deceit. It is also, however, a process of enhancing our appreciation of the text's power by revealing its structures, uncovering its strategies, and placing in relief its enriching internal and external interconnections.

The criticism of the New Testament text is a developing discipline. At least three phases, each yielding a different kind of criticism, can be discerned. The first phase brought criticism to bear on the text as **witness.** The credibility and competence of the New Testament witnesses, the accuracy of their testimony in relation to its subject matter, and the quality of the testifying itself were all brought into question through the use of historical critical and literary critical methods. This project began with the birth of the higher criticism and continues to be developed as new methods emerge for interrogating the social world of the New Testament, the psychological and sociological structures of both writers and readers of texts, and the literary dynamics of the text itself.

The second stage, launched by Rudolf Bultmann, brought criticism to bear on the **mythological worldview** of the New Testament authors. Bultmann highlighted the pervasive effect on the biblical text of an unreflective, uncriticized, unscientific or mythological, and therefore (in Bultmann's view) incredible, understanding of cosmology, which posited a three-tiered universe, allowed for divine interventions into history that suspended the natural cause-and-effect relations that structure reality for the scientific mind, and bypassed secondary causality in attributing natural events directly to God.[18] Bultmann's project of demythologization was a critical program for neutralizing the effects on the biblical testimony of the unscientific mentality of the writers. Later work on the nature and function of mythology (which is not primitive science) and on science (which is not the sole structuring agent of modern intelligibility) has largely relativized the radical conclusions of Bultmann. However, his contribution to the critical approach to the biblical text remains important because he made visible an aspect of the text that had been transparent and therefore unrecognized, namely, the role of the universally accepted and unquestioned sense of reality that operates in the production of any text.

The third stage of critical development in relation to the biblical text is the direct progeny of Bultmann's discovery of the role of worldview. A text is colored not only by one's cosmological worldview but also by one's **ideology,** that is, that entire generalized theoretical structuring of reality through which one experiences all of life. Ideology is universal in that all people participate in some theoretical structuring of reality. In this sense ideology is no more negative than psychology or sociology. However, all ideologies involve "interests," that is, concerns about how reality is structured and functions and for what purposes.

Modern political theorists have made us aware that the interpretation and understanding of reality in most societies, and especially in post-tribal technological-industrial societies, is tied to the power agenda and interests of those who enjoy personal or social ascendancy and that this ideology controls the social, economic, political, and religious structures and procedures of the society to the advantage of those in power.[19] Thus, for example, Walter Ong has shown how education, which, in the abstract, ought to be a cooperative maieutic enterprise open to all within a nurturing institution, has become in the Western world an agonistic ritual procedure modeled on and incorporating the male struggle for existence against the overwhelming feminine.[20] Feminist scholars have shown how the interest of males in maintaining their superiority in domestic and public life has resulted in the patriarchal structure of virtually all modern societies.[21] Political liberation theologians have demonstrated how the concern of the wealthy minority in poor societies to legitimate and maintain their control of a disproportionate share of the land and money has controlled not only political reality but even theology and the preaching of the Gospel.[22] Leonardo Boff has explained how this same type of power agenda motivates the clerical monopoly of the means of religious production, that is, the sacramental system, in the Roman Catholic church.[23]

Ideology criticism has given us insight into a new dimension of the hermeneutical dictum that there is no such thing as presuppositionless understanding. It is not only the presuppositions that we inherit in language and culture, not only the accepted understanding of physical reality or cosmology, not only the officially sanctioned religious beliefs and norms of the community, but also the ideological distortions of our sense of reality as a whole that shape unconsciously both the writing and the reading of the text. Consequently, any adequate criticism of the biblical text requires not only traditional historical and literary criticism that interrogate the text as witness and as work, not only a sensitive and critical treatment of the worldview that the text incorporates, but especially a thoroughgoing criticism of its ideology, especially in respect to the oppressive distortion of reality for the prosecution of the power agenda of the elements in society that enjoy hegemony.[24]

The goal of criticism, however, is not only to sift the text for error, deceit, and distortion (i.e., to protect the reader from the text) but also to protect the text from a premature appropriation by the reader. The spontaneous assumption that if one can read the text one understands it grounds both biblical fundamentalism and naive literalism and makes the text unable to say anything the reader does not already think. For the dialogue between text and reader to be genuine, the text must maintain its identity, its "strangeness," which both gifts and challenges the reader. It must be allowed to say what it says, regardless of whether this is comfortable or assimilable by the reader. Critical methodology, by allowing the text to appear in its otherness, allows it to challenge the reader's assumptions, to widen the reader's horizons, to invite the reader to participate in a world that is truly different.

The distancing of the text from the reader that both protects the reader against the limitations of the text and the text from loss of identity by nondialectical assimilation to the world of the reader has, as its ultimate goal, not the alienation of the text from the reader but a second, and postcritical, naïveté. Unless the text, once criticized, can again be brought close, can again become transparent, the transformative encounter between reader and subject matter cannot take place. If the reader remains the critic, she or he is like the person who goes to a play but can never forget that the actors are acting, that the action is a play, and that the play's world is a stage. Unless the reader can, in a postcritical moment, be caught up in the text, lost in the text, the text cannot function for that person as transformative mediation of meaning. It may well be a source of information, but it cannot project a new world in which a greater fullness of being is possible for the one who comes to inhabit it and whose horizon of existence is expanded by merging with that of the text.

2. *Understanding of Meaning as Appropriation*

Both Ricoeur and Gadamer agree that understanding in the fullest and most proper sense of the term, as the final objective of interpretation, involves a "fusion of horizons." The world horizon of the reader fuses with the horizon of the world projected by the text. The reader enters into and is transformed by the world before the text even as this world (as we will see later) is modified by the reader's critical interpretation. We have seen how this happens in the case of the reader or spectator caught up in the work of art. For the space of the aesthetic experience the reader is absorbed in the reality of the text and at the end is "a different person." Sometimes the difference is minor, a slightly different slant on some aspect of life, but sometimes the encounter is profoundly transformative, as was Augustine's reading of the *Life of Antony* or Teresa of Avila's contemplation of the sculpture of the flagellation. In some way the two worlds have fused, and the reader or viewer now lives a transformed reality.

In the case of the New Testament reader, however, both long familiarity with the text and the distancing effected by critical interpretation impede the spontaneous absorption of the reader into the world before the text. The immediacy of reader to subject matter that is the second naïveté is not spontaneous but must be deliberately fostered, as, for example, someone might do who is long familiar with or professionally involved with Shakespearean literature. How, then, can one foster the postcritical encounter of reader and biblical text that results in what Ricoeur calls appropriation—that is, making one's own that which is other, in this case something that is not only other in itself (the world before the text) but also other through critical distancing? The process involves two distinct but nonseparable interactive moments: aesthetic surrender and critical existential interpretation.

a. Aesthetic Surrender

Entering into the world projected by the text is not first and foremost an exercise of discursive rationality but a process of aesthetic involvement. This is as true (although not as easy) for the trained critic as for the appreciative but nonprofessional spectator or reader. Every work of art is a dynamic structure whose purpose is to create its viewer/reader/hearer. As narrative critics of the New Testament have shown, the gospel text as narrative (through the agency of the implied author) creates the implied reader, that is, the appropriate subjectivity to participate in the dynamics of the text.[25] This does not necessarily mean that the actual reader is intended to agree with everything said in the text. It might be part of the very purpose of the text to make the reader reject a certain position or idea expounded by the text. It means, rather, that the text, through its use of plot, character, dialogue, irony, and so on, creates a world within which, and according to whose dynamics, the reader operates for the duration of the aesthetic experience.[26]

The relation of reader to text is not that of student to teacher or even that of researcher to informational source. It is the relation of participant to work of art. Surrender to the work is not necessarily surrender to the subject matter but a certain way of entering into the text, not in order to extract information, but in order to live in the world projected by the text. To enter in this way into the text the reader must suspend disbelief, suppress the distance that makes one say, "This isn't real; it's just a story." Like the spectator who, having finished reading the reviews, settles back as the lights dim and the curtain goes up and ceases to think about critical discussions of this play or to remember the names of the actors, the reader of the New Testament who has passed through the exegetical and critical phases of encounter and arrived at the final stage of interpretation or appropriation puts aside specific reflection on historical details and scholarly arguments about authorship and begins to participate in the play of the text.

This can be done as one hears the gospel text as part of an effective liturgy, as one enters into profound meditative prayer, or as one shares Gospel faith within a trusting community. The text is experienced in its immediacy and transparency. The parable is my story, redescribing my world as challenged and transformed by the values of the reign of God. The psalm is my song, the words lent to my soul and my tongue as I exult in the goodness and beauty of God and creation or cry out in agony before the injustice of life. The prophecy is spoken to our historical reality, judging injustice and promising salvation to me and the community in which I live. Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life is spoken to me, to us, about our faith and our Eucharist.

Many biblical scholars regard this kind of engagement with the text as nonscholarly devotionalism. In fact, *experiencing* the text as text is as integral to the work of biblical interpretation as hearing a Mozart symphony played in concert is integral to the work of the music critic or as seeing *Hamlet* in the theater is to the work of the literary scholar. It is assuredly not the whole of scholarly work, but unless the critic's work both begins in appreciation and ends in appropriation it remains peculiarly sterile and lifeless. I would question whether someone who has never felt the religious power of the gospel text, no matter how learned her or his biblical scholarship might be and regardless of whether she or he actually comes to share Christian faith, is competent for New Testament research.

It is not surprising that the work on parables of an Amos Wilder and his school of literary criticism has been so much more fruitful than that of an Adolf Jülicher and his descendants. The latter made major contributions to our historical understanding of the gospels and of the content of Jesus' teaching, but they could not get much beyond the level of information. For literature to "work," that is, for it to have a truly transformative effect on its interlocutors, the reader must surrender to its dynamics at least long enough to be caught up in its existential horizon.

b. Critical Existential Interpretation

After reading a deeply moving work, especially one that deals with the most important issues of life, and having been totally taken up into it so that one emerges shaken or exalted, one feels a profound need to reflect upon or discuss the subject matter of the work. This reflection or discussion is not concerned with exegesis or literary criticism but with existential meaning. When one puts down Elie Wiesel's *Night* one's questions are not about the historical details of the Nazi concentration camps or the literary techniques of the novelist of the Holocaust. They are about God and evil: God's existence and what it means for God to die in the soul of a child confronted with absolute evil.

Transformative interpretation, the interpretation by which we appropriate the meaning of the text by a fusion of horizons with the world the text projects, is essentially an enterprise within the area of spirituality, that is, of the conscious effort toward life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value.[27] It involves a radical personal engagement with what Gadamer calls the truth claims of the text. Truth claims are not merely dogmatic propositions, assertions of fact, or deliverances of information but the presentation of reality that offers itself to us as a way of being, as a possible increase or decrease of personal subjective reality.

As Bernard Lonergan and his school have explained, the life-project of self-integration through transcendence involves a multidimensional conversion: intellectual, moral, psychological, affective, sociopolitical.[28] Different New Testament texts address different dimensions of our human "effort to be," but formally they all address to the reader questions that have or relate to ultimate significance. For example, the existential question raised by the New Testament about Jesus is whether or not he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. This is not a question about what messiah meant to first-century Jews or whether Son of God implied divinity at the time of the writing of the gospels (important exegetical questions that belong to another level of interpretation). It is not even a question of whether, theoretically, a human being could be Son of God or whether one can legitimately locate ultimate salvific power in an historical person (also important questions that may well have to be answered before ultimate questions can be engaged). The question is whether Jesus is in truth, as the text claims, the Savior and what the implications of my answer are for me and for the rest of the world.

When one arrives at the stage of existential interpretation, one's engagement with the text's truth claims has ultimate personal significance, but the engagement remains a critical one. The criticism bears, however, not on the establishment of what the text says but on the truth of what the text claims. Here the critical scholar parts company with the fundamentalist who believes that personal engagement with the text is an all-or-nothing proposition; that is, that one either submits totally to the text's claim or rejects it totally. The critical interpreter enters into a genuine dialogue with the text that, like all dialogue, not only permits but demands development of both the interpreter and the text.[29]

Ideology criticism has made us aware that the biblical text contains not only historical inaccuracies, scientific errors, mythological assumptions that are unassimilable by the modern mind, but also morally objectionable positions. Feminist criticism in particular, by exposing the patriarchal ideology, androcentric presuppositions, and sexist language and teaching of the New Testament, has raised the problem of how a sacred text that is rife with morally unacceptable material can continue to function normatively for a faith community.[30] How is the justice-minded Christian to respond to a text that regards women as derivative and defective, that marginalizes, trivializes, and even demonizes women, that excludes women from full religious participation and legitimates male domination? Can such subject matter be appropriated by being assented to and thus allowed to structure the self-world of the reader? The answer has to be no. The hermeneutical question is how we can understand the interpretive process by which the reader identifies and repudiates the morally unacceptable subject matter of the text without repudiating the text itself and its truth claims.

The written text, as we have seen, transcends itself in two ways. First, by the surplus of meaning that the text has in virtue of its semantic autonomy and its freedom from the constraints of its compositional situation, the text is open to a succession of different interpretations that may not have been, even implicitly, part of the meaning intended by the author. Second, by its generation of an effective history that qualifies and transforms its meaning, a text can actually come to mean something different from what it was originally intended or understood to mean, that is, it can "develop." A clear example of this kind of development is the gradual expansion of the meaning of the affirmation in the American Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" from its original eighteenth-century application to adult, white, property-owning males to its twentieth-century universal inclusion of all people.

The development of the text of the Declaration of Independence is an example of the interaction of effective history and surplus of meaning. The text "all men are created equal" generated an historical experience in the new nation that gradually revealed to Americans the humanity and therefore the equal rights of all people, including women, children, people of color, immigrants, poor people, and handicapped people, as well as adult, white, male property owners. The text was susceptible of reinterpretation, without verbal change, because the word "men" as it occurs in a semantically autonomous text is not limited to the meaning intended by its eighteenth-century users. "Men," at the time the Declaration was written, was a generic term referring to all human beings. Thus, no matter what the *framers* of the Declaration intended (and they certainly did not intend to acknowledge the full humanity of women, children, and slaves, i.e., the inclusion of these classes in the term "men") the *text* intends whoever is recognized as human.

The process of interpretation that gradually expanded the meaning of the text was the dialogical one described by Gadamer, in which the interpreter interrogates the text about its subject matter not by examining the surface affirmations of the text (the text as answer) but by trying to discern the question to which the text is an answer (the question behind the text). The question behind this text is not, Who is equal? but, What is the basis of the equality that we acknowledge among men? The answer is, Their humanity. Consequently, if humanity is predicated of others outside the circle of those the framers originally had in mind, the affirmation of equality applies to them as well, regardless of the limitations in the minds of the framers of the Declaration.

The result of this expansion of meaning is part of the effective historical consciousness of the American people, that is, of the developing awareness of what humanity entails and how its requirements must shape the social-political-economic life of the nation. As that consciousness has developed, it has enabled the American people to look at their founding documents, subsequent laws, actual legal practice, educational assumptions, national customs, and so on and to draw these documents and practices forward out of the very limited past of the eighteenth century into an expanded present. Although the actual words on the page have not changed, the text of the Declaration of Independence has changed, because the textual meaning of the document has expanded.

In much the same way, the biblical text must develop. The meaning of the New Testament is not limited to the meaning intended by its authors. Nor are Christian believers of the twentieth century faith-clones of their first-century forebears. The text has a surplus of meaning that interacts with the historical consciousness of contemporary Christians who, partly because of their very formation in Gospel values (i.e., because of the effective history of the Gospel itself), have come to see the moral unacceptability of slavery, anti-Semitism, and patriarchy.

This expanded consciousness leads to a questioning of the text, not merely about what it says—that is, its answers—but also in terms of the questions behind the text. What gave rise to the Pauline legitimation of slavery and male domination? Was it a belief in the intrinsic Christian value of one human being owning and/or dominating another (which other Pauline texts as well as the gospels themselves make highly dubious), or was it a lack of imagination in the face of the social status quo? or a failure of will before the power of the state? or an inability to see the historically concrete implications of freedom in Christ? or even a moral unwillingness to face the consequences of preaching the Gospel of freedom in a context of patriarchal power? If it was any of the latter, then interpretation will lead not to a reaffirmation of slavery or patriarchy but to a completion, in terms of the Gospel as a whole, of the agenda that Paul announced in proclaiming our liberation in Christ but that he himself was unable to bring to fruition in sociopolitical concreteness. Transformative interpretation, in other words, is not blind submission to the text as answer but an in-depth engagement of the text's subject matter, of its truth claims, in terms of the developed Christian consciousness of the contemporary believer within the contemporary community of faith.

But what if Paul, or one of the evangelists, actually intended to affirm the intrinsic inferiority of women or the moral legitimacy of slavery? In other words, what if the truth claim of the text is actually immoral? Does the rejection of biblical subject matter that is untrue or immoral imply a repudiation of the New Testament's claim as revelatory text? For the person who believes in plenary verbal inspiration, an affirmative answer to this question is unavoidable. But for the interpreter who regards the text as a human (albeit a divinely inspired) text mediating the revelatory encounter with God, the theological and moral limitations of the text are no more ultimately destructive of its revelatory potential than its scientific, psychological, ethical, historical, or other limitations.

The reason that critical exegesis is insufficient as a total approach to the text and that interpretation in the full sense of the term must terminate in appropriation is precisely that the ultimate question is not simply, What does the text say? but, What is the meaning of the text for the believing community? Part of that meaning may be that some of the beliefs held and positions taken by the community in the course of its history are untrue or immoral, a judgment based precisely on what the community has discerned through its formation by this text.

Appropriation of the meaning of the text, the transformative achievement of interpretation, is neither a mastery of the text by the reader (an extraction of its meaning by the application of method) nor a mastery of the reader by the text (a blind submission to what the text says) but an ongoing dialogue with the text about its subject matter. For the believer who, as I have claimed, has the most integral access to the text, this dialogue is rooted in the faith that this text is a mediation of transformative divine revelation. The dialogue is never-ending because of the text's surplus of meaning, which allows it to generate an effective history in interaction with the historical consciousness of the believing community. Like any serious dialogue that terminates in existential understanding, it requires a methodical effort to understand what the text is talking about (its reference) and what it says about its referent (sense) as well as a critically moderated surrender to the "play," that is, to the dynamics of the text as text. This dialogue cannot be called off because of limitations in either the text's mediation of its subject matter or the capacities of the interpreter. Rather, it must be pursued with relentless love by those who believe that this text, thoroughly human as Jesus himself, is yet a privileged mediator of the encounter between God and humanity. For believers it is the revelatory text.

Notes

1. See *IT*, pp. 71–88, for a brief but dense presentation of this topic. For a fuller explanation of his thought, see "What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," *HHS:* 145–164.
2. *IT*, pp. 75–79.
3. This is where Ricoeur's theory of the dialectic between explanation and understanding, as opposed to Dilthey's opposition of the two and Gadamer's disjunction between method and truth, proves its superiority.
4. A good brief treatment of this topic is Robert Morgan, "Sachkritic," *DBI:* 604–605.
5. For fuller treatment of this subject, see my article "The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Interpretation," *TS* 43 (March 1982): 52–68.
6. For Gadamer's development of effective historical consciousness, see *TM*, pp. 341–379. For a clear explanation of Gadamer on this point, see Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *HHS*, pp. 65–78.
7. See, e.g., the section on "Models in Science," in Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 67–102. A much more extensive treatment is Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures, 1989–1991*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), esp. part 1.
8. See *TM*, pp. 300–324, on history of effects and application.
9. *TM*, pp. 324–341; Linnell E. Cady, "Hermeneutics and Tradition: The Role of the Past in Jurisprudence and Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (October 1986): 439–463.
10. Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *HHS*, pp. 92–93.
11. Ricoeur's "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *HHS*, pp. 87–100, is a very clear and comprehensive summary of thought on this subject.
12. An amusing example of an interpretation that drains a particularly meaningful text of its significance occurs in Cyrus H. Gordon, "Canaanite Mythology," in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. Samuel Noah Kramer (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), pp. 198–199. He uses the role of furniture throwing in mythological battles to explain Ps. 23:5: "In Psalm 23:5, 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies' may mean that God provides His own with ammunition."
13. See, e.g., Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978); James Breech, *Jesus and Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) and *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
14. *IT*, pp. 75–79.
15. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 93–114.
16. See Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics," *HHS*, esp. pp. 176–181, for one of the clearest expositions in Ricoeur's work of the notion of the "world in front of the text."
17. This is the burden of Paul Ricoeur's famous "Conclusion: The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought," in *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 347–357.
18. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).
19. Perhaps the most eloquent voice on this subject in relation to the interpretation of texts is Jürgen Habermas, whose theory of "systematically distorted communication" has posed a major challenge to Gadamer's project of rehabilitating authority, prejudice, and tradition as the necessary conditions for interpretation. Paul Ricoeur, in "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *HHS:* 63–100, gives a remarkably clear explanation of each position and then mediates between them to a highly satisfying, nonreductive dialectic.
20. Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

21. See Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
22. See, e.g., the introduction in Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), pp. 3-6; Jose Comblin, "Why Theology?" in *The Church and the National Security State,* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 1-27.
23. Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power,* trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985), esp. pp. 110-115.
24. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response,* ed. Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richesin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 91-112.
25. For an excellent introduction to this topic of the "creation of the reader," see Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel,* Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 82 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), pp. 6-20.
26. Perhaps the most important work from which recent New Testament scholars have drawn their theoretical tools for narrative analysis is Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).
27. I am using here the definition of spirituality that I developed in "Spirituality in the Academy," *TS* 50 (December 1989), pp. 681-684.
28. See Bernard Lonergan, "Theology in Its New Context" and "The Dimensions of Conversion," in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation,* ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978), 3-21, as well as the other essays in this volume.
29. *TM,* pp. 387-389. In these important pages Gadamer explains how the text, even though not a person, can nevertheless be taken up into the dialogical dynamic, the hermeneutical conversation, and be affected in its meaning by the interpretive process.
30. This is the problem I take up in "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *BTB* 19 (January 1989): 3-10 and in "Scripture: Tool of Patriarchy or Resource for Transformation?" in *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991), 37-71.

7

A Case Study: A Feminist Interpretation of John 4:1–42

A. Introduction

In this final chapter I will attempt to illustrate, through an interpretation of John 4:1–42, the type of integral interpretation that the hermeneutical theory developed in this study envisions. The interpretation will be methodologically limited by the approach I have selected, namely, feminist criticism. This approach has been selected because of the question that interests me, namely, the identity and role of the woman in the passage.

The goal of the interpretive process is not merely exegetical-critical but properly hermeneutical. In other words, I do not propose simply to discover what the text says about the Samaritan Woman in relation to Jesus in the context of the first century (either in the life of the earthly Jesus or in the Johannine community) in order to extrinsically "apply" the results to current feminist concerns. I am interested in the truth claims intrinsic to the text as they are addressed to believing readers in relation to their discipleship. The aim is to allow the world of Christian discipleship as it is projected by this text to emerge and invite the transformative participation of the reader.

B. The Approach: Feminist Critical Hermeneutics

By way of preparation for the actual interpretation of the text I will briefly explain the feminist critical hermeneutical approach that controls the methodology I am using.

1. Starting Point of Feminist Criticism

Feminist biblical criticism, which dates back to the nineteenth-century efforts of scholars like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was in abeyance for decades before its revival in the 1970s by the present generation of feminist biblical scholars.[1] Twentieth-century feminist scholars are motivated, as were Stanton and her colleagues, by the awareness that, in Western society at least, the Bible is a major source and legitimator of women's oppression in family, society, and Church. One need not be a Christian to be affected by the Christian ethos, and that ethos is pervasively androcentric (i.e., male-centered), patriarchal (i.e., male-dominative),[2] and sexist (i.e., discriminatory toward and oppressive of women). Although Christianity did not invent patriarchy and a case can be made that in some ways it has defended women from the worst implications of misogynism, it is a fact that the Bible has been and is invoked as a religious legitimator of women's oppression, and the invocation is not groundless.

The first reaction of Christian women in general and biblical scholars in particular to the realization of the Bible's role in women's oppression was denial that the Bible itself was to blame. If the Bible is God's Word, it could not be damaging to any of God's creatures. The fault must lie in misinterpretation of the text. However, the deeper women probed into the problem passages of scripture, especially the New Testament, the clearer it became that, while some problems were indeed due to mistranslation and misinterpretation, many were integral to the text itself.

It is the realization that the biblical text itself is ideologically biased against women that has raised the question that underlies all feminist criticism: can the biblical text function as revelatory text, as locus of salvific encounter with God, for women once their feminist consciousness has been raised? The answer to this question, both theoretically (i.e., in terms of hermeneutics) and practically (i.e., in terms of actual interpretation) is far from evident. It will only come, if it does, from the efforts now being expended by feminist scholars.[3]

2. Feminist Criticism as Liberationist Criticism

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and other leading feminist scholars have placed feminist biblical interpretation in the category of liberationist hermeneutics.[4] But, as Fiorenza and others have pointed out, while feminist interpretation does share with other liberationist approaches its starting point in the experience of the oppressed and its objective of social transformation, in contradistinction to the claim of traditional academic exegesis to neutrality and objectivity in the search for pure knowledge, it differs from other forms of liberationist interpretation in one very important respect. Whereas the Bible permits a fairly straightforward connection between the oppression of the poor and the stranger in the biblical story and analogous oppression of the poor and racial-ethnic minorities in contemporary society, the biblical text is not only frequently blind to the oppression of women in the Israelite and early Christian communities, but the text itself is pervasively androcentric and patriarchal, frequently sexist, and even misogynist. In other words, not only does the text frequently fail to supply women with resources for liberation; it is often enough itself the problem, demonizing women, degrading female sexuality, erasing women from the history of salvation, legitimating their oppression, and trivializing their experience.[5]

Even the great stories of salvation from oppression, for example, the Exodus and the paschal mystery of Jesus, cannot be appropriated directly by women as paradigms of liberation. When the Hebrews were rescued from oppression in Egypt, only male Hebrews were actually liberated. Women remained male property, subject now to Hebrew males rather than to Egyptians, but subjugated and oppressed nonetheless. And within a single generation the universal salvation won by Jesus was appropriated by male Christians, who began to establish and enforce restrictive conditions for women's participation in Christian discipleship.

Because the biblical text itself is not purely and simply a text of liberation for women but is itself part of the problem, the transformational hermeneutic of feminism aims not only at the liberation of the oppressed through the transformation of society (the aim of all liberationist theology and interpretation) but at the liberation of the biblical text from its own participation in the oppression of women and the transformation of the Church that continues to model, underwrite, and legitimate the oppression of women in family and society.[6]

3. Suspicion and Retrieval

Feminist biblical interpretation, as an approach, belongs in the category of ideology criticism, which starts with the assumption that the text is not "neutral" or the interpreter "objective."[7] In other words, it is rooted in suspicion as we have learned it from the great molders of the modern mind: Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx.

First, the text is not neutral. The biblical text, like other historical documents, was written by the "historical winners" who virtually never write *the* story but *their* story. Women are the quintessential "historical losers" in that they are the doubly oppressed of every oppressed group throughout history. The result is that women in the biblical text are often marginalized when they are not omitted entirely, pornographically reduced to their sexuality (because they are presented as they are seen by and function for men), demonized (by male projection), or trivialized (as nonparticipants in the spheres of male activity that alone is deemed significant). One cannot assume, in other words, in reading the biblical text that it gives us an accurate picture of women in the community of salvation. We get the picture of women that men created, which corresponds to the male understanding of women and their place in society at the time of the writing of these documents. The feminist critic must, therefore, presume that she or he is dealing with a distorted record from which much has been omitted and in which much that is included is unreliable.

Second, the interpreters of the biblical text never have been, and are not now, objective, if by objective one means ideologically unbiased. Until very recently all the biblical scholars (exegetes and teachers), pastors, and homilists have been men living in, trained for, and ruling over patriarchal churches and society. They shared the mind-set of those who produced the biblical text and so noticed nothing, or very little, amiss in its presentation of women and men.

It is characteristic of ideology that it is invisible to the one whose bias it underwrites. Usually, only those who do not participate in the power system whose agenda is propagated by the ideology are aware that what seems to be simply "the way things are" is actually an oppressive conceptual, cultural, and social system. The "hermeneutical advantage" of the oppressed is precisely this ability to see, from the margins of social reality, what is second nature to those who are the beneficiaries of the social system.

Feminist critics must, therefore, suspect of antiwoman bias both the text itself and the history of interpretation. This is not academic paranoia but realism. At the same time they must propose an alternative stance to the false objectivity whose existence (and even possibility) they deny. Feminists, with other ideologically aware scholars, know that not only is there no presuppositionless interpretation but that there are no ideologically neutral presuppositions. In other words, everyone interprets from a perspective that is controlled to some extent by her or his social location. The only access to a relatively unbiased and therefore nonoppressive approach is to become self-aware of and explicit about one's social location and the effective historical consciousness to which it has contributed and then to methodically criticize and thereby neutralize as much as possible the ideological effects.

However, if feminist consciousness terminates in suspicion, it must end by repudiating the biblical text as hopelessly antiwoman and therefore without salvific potential for women. Some feminists have indeed come to this conclusion.[8] Those who continue to hope that the biblical text is susceptible of a liberating hermeneutic must pass by way of suspicion to retrieval. This chapter is an exercise in the hermeneutics of retrieval, the effort to face without flinching the real problems in both the text and the history of interpretation and to move through the confrontation to the liberating potential of the text.

4. Feminist Critical Strategy

Numerous exegetical and critical strategies are employed by feminist biblical scholars in the effort to liberate the text from its own and its interpreters' ideological bias and women from the oppressive effects of that bias.[9] I will mention here five of the most common, but this list is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and different methods are appropriate to different texts.

a. Translation

Feminist interpretation often begins by challenging translations that privilege the male/masculine at the expense of the female/feminine.[10] For example, when the masculine plural in the Greek is plainly inclusive in meaning, many modern translations (although, happily, fewer) fail to use inclusive modern language, thereby perpetuating the fixation of the imagination on males as the normative and/or only important participants in the drama of salvation. A case in point is the NRSV translation of John 4:12–14, in which *hoi huioi* is translated Jacob's "sons" even though, if his daughters had not also drunk of the well, there would have been very few sons! The masculine plural is used in Greek, as it often is in English, as the inclusive term for a group including both men and women, that is, for descendants, both sons and daughters in this case (cf. English "brethren"). To translate it "sons" is, therefore, actually inaccurate, at least in modern English.

Likewise, in the RSV (happily corrected in the NRSV) Jesus is presented as saying "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give *him* will never thirst; the water that I shall give *him* will become in *him* a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (emphasis mine). The translation of *autō* as masculine, given that Jesus is talking to a woman and plainly intends his message to have universal application, is literalistic and false to the meaning of the passage. Feminist consciousness recognizes and challenges the ideological agenda of rendering women textually invisible, which is an important factor in keeping them socially and ecclesially invisible.

b. Focusing on Texts with Liberating Potential

One of the earliest types of feminist interpretation, which still has value provided that it is not used in isolation, consists in focusing on what has been called "woman material" in the New Testament. In other words, feminist scholars located and exploited texts in which women figure prominently, are presented positively, or overcome actual historical or textual attempts to suppress them. The Samaritan Woman story has been used this way, and John 4:27, the episode of the disciples' return from the town and their confusion at Jesus' conversation with a woman, has often focused the attention of feminist interpreters. In my interpretation I will exploit this episode but within the context of a feminist interpretation of the passage as a whole.

The danger of this strategy is that it can unconsciously support the underlying ideological presupposition that women appear in history, as in life, by way of exception. In other words, it is assumed that the biblical story, like all of human history, is basically about men. If women, by way of exception, are significant at some point they must be singled out and raised to visibility. Thus, the question becomes, What does the Bible say about *women?* because the story as a whole is presumed to be not about women but about men. Nevertheless, there is value in focusing on material about women in the New Testament text because in these texts one can see clearly what is often completely hidden in the majority of the text, namely, that women existed, participated actively, and were highly significant in Christian history from its first moments.

c. Raising Women to Visibility

A third strategy of feminist interpretation consists in raising to visibility the hidden feminine element in biblical texts. In other words, attention is called to the application to women specifically of texts that are obviously liberating but whose beneficiaries seem not to include women. For example, the proclamation by the townspeople of Sychar that Jesus is the "Savior of the world" (John 4:42) was not merely a vindication of the claim of Samaritans to equal participation with Jews in the salvation offered by Jesus but also of the equal participation of women in that salvation. "World" is a universalist term, and the invisible subgroup of every excluded group is women.

d. Revealing the Text's "Secrets"

Feminist interpretation also attempts to extract from the biblical text the "secrets" about women that are buried beneath its androcentric surface, especially the hidden history of women, which has been largely obscured and distorted, if not erased altogether, by male control of the tradition. Sometimes the feminist task involves pointing to that which is plainly in the text but has remained "unnoticed" or even been denied by exegetes. For example, there are enough ambiguities in the fourth gospel's few clues to the identity of the evangelist and/or the Beloved Disciple to at least raise a serious question about whether one or both might have been female. The gospel probably does not supply enough data to settle the question either way, but that in itself should suffice to undermine the nearly universal assumption that the gospel is (of course) a male creation or that such is to be held until there is convincing evidence to the contrary.[11]

Rhetorical criticism is also used by feminist interpreters to "make the text reveal its context."[12] For example, the feminist rhetorical critic might well raise the following questions. What experience within the Johannine community would have suggested to the evangelist to make a woman the central character in two such major missionary texts as the story of the evangelization of Samaria in John 4:1–42 and the commission to announce the resurrection in John 20:11–18? Would such stories have been acceptable in a community that restricted apostolic identity and missionary activity to males? Who might have had a stake in preserving the little episode in John 4:27 (the return of the disciples), since it plays no essential role in the story being told but clearly calls into question male hesitations about women's relationship to Jesus and to the apostolate? Would a male writer have done so or been allowed by other males to do so?

e. Rescuing the Text from Misinterpretation

A very important strategy of feminist interpretation consists in discerning and challenging the androcentric, patriarchal, sexist, and misogynist misinterpretations that pervade the history of New Testament scholarship and that have deeply affected the Christian imagination through the scholarly and homiletic tradition. For example, as I will attempt to show, the consistent identification of the Samaritan Woman in John 4 as a duplicitous whore whom Jesus tricks into self-exposure and then, presumably, converts, both violates the text and allows the woman's role in the evangelization of Samaria to be minimized while the (presumably male) townspeople emerge as virtual self-evangelizers who perspicaciously recognize Jesus while dismissing the woman's testimony.

C. Historical and Literary Presuppositions

Although the approach I am taking to the Samaritan Woman story is that of feminist ideological criticism, valid interpretation demands the explicitation of the basic historical and literary critical presuppositions that are operative throughout the interpretive process. As we saw in chapters 4 and 5, the pervasively historical and literary character of the biblical text must always be taken into account, at least to some extent, in an integral interpretation.

1. Historical Presuppositions

In what follows I will focus on the apostolic identity and missionary role of the Samaritan Woman, but I start with certain historical critical presuppositions about the pericope as a whole. First, the episode in Samaria is, in all likelihood, not an historical event in the life of the earthly Jesus. Although the Lukan Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of one of his parables (Luke 10:29–37) and praises the Samaritan whom he had cured who was the only one of the ten healed lepers to return and give thanks (Luke 17:11–19), there is nothing in the synoptic tradition to suggest that the earthly Jesus exercised any ministry among the Samaritans. In fact, in Luke 9:52–53 we are told explicitly that the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus and in Matthew 10:5 that Jesus commanded the Twelve whom he sent on mission not to enter any town of the Samaritans. Furthermore, Acts 8 recounts what seems to be the first Christian mission to Samaria, and it was initiated after the death of Stephen.

The story in John 4, then, represents a reading back into the public ministry of Jesus the Johannine community's postresurrection experience of the Samaritan mission and the influence of the Samaritan converts within the community of the fourth gospel.[13] The basic purpose of the Samaritan Woman story in the gospel itself is to legitimate the Samaritan mission and to establish the full equality in the community between Samaritan Christians and Jewish Christians. The story presents this equality as resting on the fact that both groups were evangelized by Jesus himself, who, in the theology of the fourth gospel, is no less immediately present to those who "have not seen and yet have come to believe" as to those who saw him in his earthly life (John 20:29). In the story the theological issues dividing Samaritans and Jews are faced and resolved with a reaffirmation of Jewish legitimacy as bearer of the covenant faith and a surprising recognition of the essential validity of the Samaritan faith tradition despite the very real failures in fidelity of the historical successors of ancient Israel.

2. Literary Presuppositions

Two literary characteristics of the Samaritan Woman story are important for our purposes. First, in form the story is what has been called a "type story," that is, a narrative that follows a recognized biblical pattern.[14] In this case the pattern or paradigm is the story recounting the meeting of future spouses who then play a central role in salvation history. We find the pattern in the story of Abraham's servant finding Rebecca, the future wife of Isaac, at the well of Nahor (Gen. 24:10–61); Jacob meeting Rachel at the well in Haran (Gen. 29:1–20); and Moses receiving Zipporah as wife after his rescue of the seven daughters of Reuel at the well in Midian (Exod. 2:16–22).

In the Johannine story Jesus meets the woman at the most famous well of all, Jacob's well in Samaria, that is, ancient Israel. Jesus has already been identified at Cana as the true Bridegroom who supplied the good wine for the wedding feast (John 2:9–10) and by John the Baptist as the true Bridegroom to whom God has given the New Israel as bride (John 3:27–30). Now, the new Bridegroom who assumes the role of Yahweh, bridegroom of ancient Israel, comes to claim Samaria as an integral part of the New Israel, namely, the Christian community and specifically the Johannine community. The marital theme is underscored by the male-female dynamic of the scene, the conversation between the woman and Jesus about marriage, the abundant fertility and fecundity symbolism of the episode (well, water, vessel, fruitful fields, sowing and reaping, etc.).[15]

Second, the Samaritan Woman episode must be seen within the "Cana to Cana" literary development in John 2–4. This section of the gospel, pervaded by the marital motif, begins with the wedding at Cana in chapter 2 where Jesus' *Jewish* disciples (presumably including his mother) come to believe in him through his *signs* (John 2:1–11) and ends with the healing of the Royal Official's son in Cana in chapter 4 in which a *non-Jew* (a Gentile presumably) and his whole household come to believe because of the *word* of Jesus (John 4:46–54). Within this literary unit the Samaritan Woman is clearly contrasted with Nicodemus (John 3:1–15).[16] As he comes to Jesus at night and disappears into the shadows, confused by Jesus' self-revelation, she encounters Jesus at high noon, accepts his self-revelation, and brings others to him by her testimony.

D. Theological Focus of the Story: Mission

Although the story of the Samaritan Woman is part of the presentation of Jesus as the Bridegroom of the New Israel that pervades the first section of the fourth gospel, it is also clearly a missionary story. This is evident from Jesus' discourse to his disciples in verses 31–38 as well as from the denouement of the scene, the conversion to Jesus of the Samaritan townspeople in verses 39–42.

In the discourse that intervenes between the woman's departure to evangelize the town by recounting her encounter with Jesus and the coming of the townspeople to him, Jesus speaks to his disciples, who have returned from their errand in the town. He attaches what is occurring before their eyes to his own mission from God by declaring that his deepest hunger, namely, to do God's will, has been satisfied (v. 34) by his conversation with the woman and its consequences. He has no need of the earthly food they have brought him. Furthermore, he calls the attention of the disciples to Samaria, "white for the harvest," and indicates that its conversion is part of the great missionary venture of the Church in which they participate but which they did not originate and do not control (vv. 35–38).

When the townspeople come to Jesus, they do so, the reader is explicitly told, because of "the woman's testimony" (v. 39), and they finally confess him to be "the Savior of the world" (v. 42), which is clearly a postglorification Johannine formulation of Christian faith in Jesus. My question, then, is, What is the identity and role of the Samaritan Woman in this missionary story?

E. The Identity and Role of the Samaritan Woman: Christian Disciple-Apostle

As anyone familiar with the major commentaries on the fourth gospel knows, the treatment of the Samaritan Woman in the history of interpretation is a textbook case of the trivialization, marginalization, and even sexual demonization of biblical women, which reflects and promotes the parallel treatment of real women in the Church. Rather than cite the commentators and argue with them, however, I will interpret the passage as a feminist who does not assume that most women (insofar as they are interesting at all) are whores and that Jesus' paradigmatic relationship with women is centered on saving them from sexual sins, and who does not accept the assumption that Jesus called only males to apostleship or that all missionary activity in the early Church was done by men. The interpretation should serve to call into question the standard approaches to this text.

The first clue to the woman's identity is her placement between Nicodemus, the Jewish authority who fails to recognize Jesus as Messiah or to accept his self-revelation, and the Royal Official, the pagan authority who recognizes Jesus' life-giving power and comes to faith through and in his saving word. In other words, the woman, like Nicodemus and the Royal Official, is what Raymond Collins has called a "representative figure," that is, a symbolic character.[17] Very often the symbolic characters in John (e.g., the Mother of Jesus, the Beloved Disciple, the Royal Official, the Paralytic at the Pool, the Man Born Blind) are nameless, which enhances their power to represent collectivities without losing their particularity. This is the case with the Samaritan Woman, one of the most sharply drawn characters in the gospel. This woman is symbolic not only of the Samaritans who come to Jesus through the witness of the Johannine community but, as we have already seen, of the New Israel who is given to Jesus the Bridegroom "from above." This symbolic identity should warn the reader against the sexual literalism to which so many commentators immediately leap, whether in regard to the woman's supposedly shady past or in regard to what one recent commentator described as the woman's attempt to seduce Jesus.[18]

The second clue to the woman's identity and role is her conversation with Jesus. It is important to note that the discussion, from the very first moment, is religious and even theological. The woman does not, as is often suggested, introduce extraneous theological issues as a smokescreen to distract Jesus from probing into her shameful sex life. She begins by questioning Jesus' breaking with Jewish tradition, first by speaking in public to a woman and asking to share utensils with a Samaritan, and second by his implication, in the offer of living water, that he is on a par with the patriarch Jacob who gave the well to Israel. Characteristic of Samaritan theology was its Mosaic-patriarchal tradition as opposed to the Davidic-monarchical tradition of the Jews. Thus, for the woman, Jesus' implicit claim to be on a par with the patriarch Jacob has enormous theological implications.

Immediately after the exchange on the five husbands (to which we will return shortly), the woman recognizes Jesus, whom she had at first identified as merely a man and a Jew, as a prophet (v. 19), and she asks him where true worship is to take place, on Mount Gerizim as the Samaritans held or in Jerusalem as the Jews believed. According to Samaritan theology the messiah would be, not a descendent of David, but a prophet like Moses (as promised in Deut. 18:18-19) who, upon his return, would reveal all things and restore true worship, not in the temple of Jerusalem, but in Israel, that is, in the northern kingdom. In other words, the woman is pursuing a careful investigation of the identity of Jesus, who has already indicated his affinity with the patriarchs and his prophetic capacity to "tell her all things." She wants to know where he stands on the issue of true worship, which, in Samaritan theology, is not only a prophetic concern but specifically a messianic one.

When Jesus, after vindicating the claim of the Jews to be the legitimate bearers of the covenant tradition, goes on to invalidate by transcendence both the Jewish claim for Jerusalem and the Samaritan claim for Mount Gerizim in favor of worship in spirit and in truth, the woman suspects his messianic identity, that he is indeed the one who comes to restore true worship in Israel. Jesus confirms her intuition and reveals himself to her as not only the prophetic messiah of Samaritan expectation but as *egō eimi*, that is, by the very designation that the

Samaritans preferred for God, the "I am" of the Mosaic revelation (Exod. 3:14). This is the first use of the "I am" revelation formula in the fourth gospel.

Within this context of careful theological scrutiny of Jesus by the woman culminating in Jesus' self-identification as equal to and even greater than the patriarchs, prophetic messiah, and Mosaic "I am," that is, as the superabundant fulfillment of Samaritan expectation, the discussion about the five husbands takes on a completely different cast from the mildly salacious one usually evoked by commentators. Either it is totally out of place, a trivial bit of moralism or even a shallow display of preternatural knowledge on the part of Jesus, or it is an integral part of this highly theological exchange.

The woman has questioned Jesus on virtually every significant tenet of Samaritan theology. Through this process she has come to suspect that he is the messiah in and through his own self-revelation as the new prophet like Moses (significantly, not a new David), thus vindicating the Samaritan claim to be spiritually a legitimate part of the Chosen People and thus of the New Israel. Jesus has pointed the way beyond the controversy between Jews and Jerusalem, on the one hand, and Samaritans and Mount Gerizim, on the other. Both are called to transcend their particularistic traditions and to find their common identity in Jesus who is the Truth. If this story, as I have suggested, is meant to legitimate the presence of Samaritan Christians in the Johannine community and to affirm their equality with Jewish Christians, it could not have been more artistically constructed. I would suggest, then, that the dialogue on the five husbands is integral to the discussion of Samaritan faith and theology, and the "husbands" are therefore symbolic rather than literal.[19]

First, the exchange about the husbands occurs, as I have already pointed out, not as prelude to the theological discussion but in the midst of it, that is, after the woman has perceived Jesus' implicit claim to equality with the patriarchs and before she acknowledges him to be a prophet.

Second, if the scene itself is symbolically the incorporation of Samaria into the New Israel, the bride of the new Bridegroom, which is suggested by the type scene itself, then the adultery/idolatry symbolism so prevalent in the prophetic literature for speaking of Israel's infidelity to Yahweh the Bridegroom would be a most apt vehicle for discussion of the anomalous religious situation of Samaria. Samaria's infidelity to the Mosaic covenant was symbolized by its acceptance, after the return of the remnants of the northern tribes from Assyrian captivity, of the worship of the false gods of five foreign tribes (cf. 2 Kings 17:13–34). Samaria's Yahwism was tainted by false worship and therefore even the "husband" she now has (a reference to her relationship with the God of the Covenant) was not really her husband (v. 18) in the full integrity of the covenantal relationship. Salvation, Jesus therefore insists, is "from the Jews" (v. 22), who worship what they know, that is, whose Yahwist faith is integral and orthodox, while the Samaritans worship what they "do not know." Thus, in claiming that Samaria, in reality, has no husband, the woman is correctly (even if unwittingly) using the prophetic metaphor to describe the religious situation of her people. Jesus confirms her answer: "What you have said is true!" (v. 18).

This brings us to the third point. Jesus' revelation to the woman, who symbolizes Samaria, of her infidelity is not a display of preternatural knowledge that convinces the woman of Jesus' power (and thus her helplessness before him), embarrassing her into a diversionary tactic in an effort to escape moral exposure. Rather, it is exactly what she acknowledges it to be when she says in response to his revelation, "I perceive that you are a prophet" (v. 19). Jesus' declaration that Samaria "has no husband" is a classic prophetic denunciation of false worship, like Hosea's oracle in which the prophet, expressing God's sentiments toward unfaithful Israel, says, "Plead with your mother, plead – for she is not my wife and I am not her husband – that she put away her harlotry from her face and her adultery from between her breasts" (Hos. 2:2).

The woman challenges Jesus' prophetic judgment by insisting that "Our fathers [i.e., the patriarchs] worshiped on this mountain" (i.e., the Samaritan tradition rests on the authority of the patriarchs), but Jesus vindicates his position, insisting that his prophetic judgment on Samaria is just but also that the question of where to worship has become irrelevant, because, just as Samaritan theology taught, the messianic era that has arrived in Jesus will be characterized by true worship of God in spirit because God is spirit (cf. vv. 20–24). The woman is overcome by this interpretation of Samaritan faith and recognizes that Jesus may be the very messiah who, according to Samaritan eschatological hope, would "proclaim all things to us," which is what Jesus has just done (v. 25) and what the woman will eventually offer as evidence to her fellow townspeople: "Come and see a man who told me [i.e., us] all I [i.e., we] have ever done!" (v. 29). Jesus confirms her conclusion with his lapidary and unambiguous self-identification as messiah and as the God of Mosaic revelation, "I am" (v. 26).

In summary, the entire dialogue between Jesus and the woman is the "wooing" of Samaria to full covenant fidelity in the New Israel by Jesus, the New Bridegroom. It has nothing to do with the woman's private moral life but with the covenant life of the community. Nowhere in the fourth gospel is there a dialogue of such theological depth and intensity. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3 ends in a long theological monologue by Jesus in which Nicodemus has ceased to participate. In chapter 6 Jesus, in response to occasional "foil lines" from his completely confused and/or resistant interlocutors, gives a lengthy theological monologue on faith. And at the Last Supper Jesus gives several lengthy theological discourses. But in this extraordinary scene the woman is not simply a "foil" feeding Jesus cue lines. She is a genuine theological dialogue partner gradually experiencing Jesus' self-revelation even as she reveals herself to him.

At the precise moment of Jesus' culminating self-revelation, the disciples, who had gone into the town to buy food, arrive. They are shocked to find Jesus talking to a *woman.* Interestingly enough, it is not his talking to a Samaritan that upsets them. This may well indicate that in the Johannine community, by the time the gospel was written, the issue of Samaritan integration was long settled, while the issue of women's role in the community was still a subject of lively debate. In any case, the disciples realize uneasily that Jesus "seeks" something in or of this woman, and they dare not question his intention.[20] The evangelist confirms the reader's intuition that what shocks the disciples is the woman's role by inserting a narratively unnecessary detail over which considerable exegetical ink has been spilled: "then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city." Like the apostle-disciples in the synoptic gospels whose leaving of nets, boats, parents, or tax stall symbolized their abandonment of ordinary life to follow Jesus and become apostles, this woman abandons her daily concerns and goes off to evangelize the town.

In the fourth gospel *dzēteō* (to seek)[21] is often used as a quasi-technical theological term for the deep desire that finalizes religiously significant attitudes and actions. Jesus' first words in the gospel, to his first disciples, are *ti dzēteite,* "What do you seek?" (John 1:38). His question to Mary Magdalene on the morning of the resurrection is *tina dzēteis,* "Whom do you seek?" (John 20:15). Throughout the gospel such themes as "seeking glory," "seeking to kill," "seeking the will of the one who sent me," and "seeking the truth" emphasize the theological import of the term by marking the ultimate motivations of various characters. In this case the disciples are made very uneasy by what Jesus seems to seek from this woman.

This little interlude of the return of the disciples undoubtedly tells us more about the Johannine community than about the earthly Jesus. The theological and missionary role of the woman is profoundly unsettling to the male disciples, who see themselves as the privileged associates of Jesus, who, nevertheless, seems to have gotten along quite well without them. He does not need the food they have brought him (vv. 31–34), because his dialogue with the woman has satisfied both his hunger to do the will of the one who sent him and the thirst that symbolically mediated their encounter. And the Samaritan mission, plainly in the hands of the woman, is one in which Jesus says they will participate as "reapers." But they do not initiate it and it is not under their control (vv. 35–38). It seems not unlikely that whoever wrote the fourth gospel had some experience of women Christians as theologians and as apostles, was aware of the tension this aroused in the community, and wanted to present Jesus as legitimating female participation in male-appropriated roles. Again, one cannot help wondering about the identity of the evangelist.

As the disciples lapse into silence, we are told that "many of the Samaritans . . . believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (v. 39). Literally the text says *dia ton logon tēs gunaikos marturousēs,* that is, "through the word of the woman bearing witness." We have already explored, in chapter 4, the significance of witness as the form of the gospels that makes them the locus of encounter between Jesus and postresurrection disciples. Remember, this scene is probably a description of the conversion of the Samaritans after the departure of Jesus. In John 17:20, at the Last Supper, Jesus on the eve of his going away prays for his disciples. The evangelist tells us that he prayed not just for those present with him at the Supper, "but also for those who will believe in me through their word" (*alla kai peri tōn pisteuontōn dia tou logou autōn eis eme*). This woman is the first and only person (presented) in the public life of Jesus through whose word of witness a group of people is brought to "come and see" and "to believe in Jesus."[22]

The effectiveness of her ministry is underlined by the fact that the townspeople not only "come to Jesus," which is a Johannine expression for beginning to believe, but they entreat Jesus to "remain with them," and he "remained there two days" (v. 40). In the fourth gospel *menō*, "to remain" or "to dwell," is a quasi-technical term for union with Jesus. These new believers are presented as coming to full Johannine faith in Jesus as the Christ (as the woman has suggested in v. 29), proclaiming him as "the Savior of the world" (v. 42). This clearly postresurrection confession of faith is another indication that this episode is a reading back into the life of the earthly Jesus of a post-Easter event. The evangelist has "narratized" as a single event the mission to the Samaritans so that it can be inserted into the gospel itself, thus attributing the presence of the Samaritans in the Johannine community to Jesus' own initiative even while assigning the work of evangelization to a disciple.

Some commentators hasten to undermine this evident identification of the woman with Jesus' postresurrection disciple-apostles[23] by pointing out that the townspeople, once they encounter Jesus, proclaim that their faith is now no longer based on the word of the woman but on that of Jesus. "We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (v. 42). This position betrays an ignorance, if not suppression, of the characteristically Johannine pattern of faith development.

In the fourth gospel we see, repeatedly, people brought to Jesus by a disciple and coming to full faith in him on the basis of Jesus' own word to them. John the Baptist (1:35–39) testified to Jesus; two of his disciples followed Jesus and remained with him that day; and they came to believe in him on the basis of that interchange. One of them, Andrew (1:41–42), brought his brother Simon to Jesus. When Jesus recognized Simon and renamed him, Simon (now Peter) became a disciple. Philip (1:44–51) brought a reluctant Nathaniel to Jesus, and again Jesus' word converted his hearer into a follower. Even after the resurrection it was the testimony of Mary Magdalene that prepared the disciples to recognize Jesus when he appeared in their midst on Easter night (cf. 20:18–20), and Thomas was reprimanded for his refusal to accept the word of witness of the other disciples, who claimed, "We have seen the Lord" (20:25).

In each case the pattern is the same: someone is brought to Jesus through the word of another but comes to believe in him definitively because of Jesus' own word. In a sense, there are no "second-generation disciples" in John, because all are bound to Jesus by his own word. Thus, the role of the Samaritan Woman in the coming to faith of the townspeople is precisely that assigned to his disciples by Jesus himself on the night before he died. She bore witness to Jesus as the messiah of Samaritan expectation, the "one who told me everything" as the prophet-like-Moses was to do, and through her word the hearers came to believe in him.

F. Results of Feminist Interpretation

We are now in a position to summarize the results of this basically feminist exegetical-critical analysis of John 4:1–42, which included historical, literary, theological, and ideological methods of investigation. My inquiry began with the question about the identity and role of the Samaritan Woman in this episode. I began with a strong suspicion about the basic cast of much traditional exegesis of this passage, which presents the woman as a disreputable (if interesting) miscreant who, failing in her attempt to distract Jesus from her sexually disgraceful past, surrenders to his overpowering preternatural knowledge of her, alerts her fellow townspeople to his presence, and then fades from the scene as they discover him for themselves and come to believe in him. Despite this critical picture of the woman, generations of believers have been deeply religiously moved by this story and drawn to this woman, a fact that testifies to its literary power and spiritual density and justifies our taking a second look at the data.

Given the male tendency, pervasive in the Bible as elsewhere, to reduce women to their sexuality and their sexuality to immorality, I entertained an alternate possibility about the woman, namely, that she was not a whore whom Jesus converted but a potential spouse whom he invited to intimacy. This hypothesis was suggested by two literary clues: the place of the episode in the Cana to Cana section of the gospel and the meeting at the well type story on which it is patterned.

The analysis of the episode from this alternative perspective revealed the woman as a symbolic figure representing the Samaritan element in the Johannine community, which understood itself as the New Israel, bride of the true Bridegroom, Jesus. In this role she engages with Jesus in a highly theological dialogue that mediates the significant religious differences between Jews and Samaritans, which undoubtedly had to be and were resolved in the Johannine community. She intuits Jesus' identity as the fulfillment of Samaritan (as well as Jewish) messianic expectations, and he confirms her intuition with the first "I am" self-revelation of the fourth gospel. The woman evangelizes her fellow Samaritans, who, in the classic faith pattern of the fourth gospel, come to Jesus, accept his word, and acknowledge him implicitly as Christ and explicitly as universal Savior. He abides with them as they come to abide in his word and thus in the Johannine community, whose theology, especially in its high christology and universalism, reflects the Samaritan influence on its origins.

In this context the dialogue about the five husbands, which hardly makes sense as an historical event since five successive marriages (as opposed to mere concubinage with several men) by a woman of that religious culture is totally implausible, assumes its theological character as symbolic discourse about the covenant. Jesus the prophet uses the familiar adultery/idolatry metaphor of the prophetic tradition to call Samaria to renounce its historical infidelity and to embrace the worship of the one God in spirit and in truth. The path to Christian identity for the Samaritans does not necessarily pass by way of Jerusalem.

While this interpretation, which seems to make better sense of the pericope than the hypothesis of a long digression on the woman's morals for the sole purpose of displaying Jesus' preternatural knowledge, allows the woman to function symbolically and theologically rather than merely sexually in the episode, it also raises a problem. Feminist biblical scholars have called attention to the underlying sexism of the prophetic tradition's marital metaphor for the covenant relationship.[24] Not only is it based on the model of patriarchal marriage to which male domination and female subordination are intrinsic, but it always casts God as the faithful and forgiving husband and Israel as the faithless and adulterous wife, thus consolidating the entrenched tendency to divinize men and demonize women. Jesus, in this episode, does not exploit the pornographic potential of the prophetic tradition, in that he neither accuses nor condemns the woman but merely confirms her self-identification. However, the fact that the evangelist uses the metaphor continues its legitimation in the Christian community.

The brief episode of the return of the disciples, looked at from a feminist perspective, reveals the all-too-familiar uneasiness of men when one of their number takes a woman too seriously, especially in the area of the men's primary concern. Jesus' discourse about his mission and its extension into Samaria only serves to confirm their worst fears, that they are neither the originators nor the controllers of the Church's mission. The effectiveness of the woman's evangelization of her town caps this scene in which any male claim to a privileged or exclusive role in the work of Jesus is definitively undermined by Jesus' own words and deeds.

G. Hermeneutical Appropriation

In this final section I will make explicit the culminating moment of integral interpretation, its termination in hermeneutical appropriation. Often this moment, which might emerge from a powerful, critically based homily or a period of deep, critically informed meditation, as well as from critically responsible scholarly study of a passage such as John 4, is not and need not be made explicit. However, just as people who have shared the experience of a moving play might discuss it and its transformative effect upon them without dissipating that effect, it is perfectly legitimate and even often necessary for the biblical interpreter not only to pursue the interpretive project to its transformative conclusions but to render them explicit.

I am presuming in what follows all that has been said since the first chapter of this study. The interpreter of John 4 (in this case, myself and my readers) whom I have posited is a believer, that is, a participant in the Christian tradition that produced and claims as its own this book (chapter 3) that it regards as scripture, that is, as the word of God that is inspired, revelatory, authoritative, and normative for the Church (chapter 2). On the basis of these operative theological convictions about the nature of the biblical text and its implications for interpretation, the interpreter, by means of historical and literary methods and ideological analysis (chapters 4 and 5), has achieved an interpretation of the text, which is summarized in the preceding section.

The questions now to be explicitly raised concern the "world in front of the text" (chapter 6). What kind of world does the text project and invite the reader to inhabit? What are the coordinates and the dynamics of the faith world of Christian discipleship that has opened before the reader as this interpretation has unfolded? And, from the standpoint of the feminist approach adopted here, is this a life-giving world for women believers?

It is important to note here that the questions being raised are not about extrinsic "application" in the ordinary sense of the term. We are not asking what conclusions for contemporary Christian life one might draw from the foregoing interpretive work. Nor are we asking what might be the implications of this interpretation for modern male-female relationships or church orders. We are asking about the transforming effect on the reader of the interpretation process itself. This effect is not some willed change in attitude or behavior brought about by an extrinsic process that follows from exegesis and criticism but rather the effect of interpreting on the interpreter. It is analogous to the effect on the audience of participation in the play. Watching the play participatively is an act of interpretation that terminates in the transformation of the viewer through the aesthetic experience itself. This transformation can be made explicit afterward (analogously to what I am doing here) and can even result in some decisions or actions to be carried out later, but it is itself not something added on to the interpretation but the terminating moment of the interpretation itself.

The interpretation of the John 4 passage initiates the reader into a world essentially characterized by an astonishing, even shocking, inclusiveness. Jesus goes to Samaria, the land of the hated "other," to confront and to heal the ancient divisions and to integrate into the New Covenant not those who were merely ignorant of, but those who had been unfaithful to, the Old Covenant. No one is excluded, no one may be excluded, from the universalist reign of the Savior of the world.

The reader cannot fail to be affected by the fact that the recipient of Jesus' universal invitation to inclusion is a woman, universal representative of the despised and excluded "other" not only in ancient Israel but throughout history and all over the world. Not only is she included, but she is engaged with respect, even asked for a gift (water) that she might receive a greater gift (living water).

Her legitimate inquiries, even her objections, are met and responded to with integrity. And even more strikingly, she is made an active participant in the establishment of the universalist reign of the Savior of the world.

The initiation of the reader into the inclusive world of discipleship is further developed by participation in a kind of reverse psychology of exclusion. The scene with the disciples, including both their shock at Jesus' inclusiveness and Jesus' discourse on the harvest that exceeds their control, delegitimates any ecclesiastical "buts" that might be raised in defense of exclusion based on ethnicity, morality, or gender.

But the reader, especially the feminist reader, will also experience the "not yet" quality of this new world. There is an intrinsic tension between the total inclusivity of this world as ideal and the lingering sexism in the idolatry/adultery prophetic metaphor, which carries a God/male/faithful versus human/female/faithless domination and subordination dynamic, at least potentially. Thus the reader experiences the interpenetration of the world of discipleship that Jesus reveals and "the world" (in the Johannine sense) that is not yet fully transformed. They are not two worlds set side by side. And the disciple-reader cannot exit from one to enter the other. We inhabit a complex situation that is "already" and "not yet." In Johannine terms, we are in the world and not of it, because we were born from above but this has not resulted in our being taken out of this world. Instead, it results in the necessity that we be preserved, by Jesus' prayer for us and by our own choices, from the evil one (John 17:14–16).

By participation through interpretation in the world this passage projects, the reader knows both what inclusion means and how to recognize the evil that undermines the reign of God to which those born of the Spirit are called. We can recognize it in the exclusiveness of those who claim superiority in their relation to Jesus, or who arrogate to themselves control of the Church and its mission. But we can also see that it is not always so blatant. Exclusiveness, domination, oppression, and discrimination are embedded in the language and metaphors of our most sacred traditions. Ideology is pervasive and will not be exposed, recognized, and repudiated except by incessant vigilance and courageous action. The feminist reader is not called to overlook the "flaw" in this passage, much less to appropriate it into her or his self-image as a Christian or to legitimate its effects in family, society, or Church. She or he is called to struggle for the transformation of this world into the world of discipleship that the text, imperfectly but nevertheless really, projects.

The integral interpretation of any biblical text is the process of engaging it in such a way that it can function as locus and mediator of transformative encounter with the living God. In this process of interpreting the New Testament as sacred scripture we experience and claim it as the Christian classic par excellence: the revelatory text.

Notes

1. For a history and description of the current situation of feminist biblical studies, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 3-40, including the notes. See also Deborah F. Middleton, "Feminist Interpretation," *DBI:* 231-234, and Elaine Wainwright, "In Search of the Lost Coin: Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic," *Pacifica* 2 (June 1989): 135-150.
2. Patriarchy is not merely a system of male domination of females but the institutionalization of a dualistic ideology of "otherness" that interlinks sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. On this point, see the excellent article of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Politics of Otherness: Biblical Interpretation as a Critical Praxis for Liberation," in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 311-325. However, for my purposes in this chapter, I will restrict my considerations to the male-female structure of otherness.
3. For the reader new to feminist biblical scholarship, three collections of essays can serve as an introduction to both the commonality of the perspective and the diversity within the field: *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics,* ed. Mary Ann Tolbert, Semeia 28 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983); *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship,* ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Society of Biblical Literature Centennial Publications (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985).
4. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Function of Scripture in the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics and Liberation Theology," in *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 43-63.
5. See Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her,* pp. 14-21, where she criticizes what she calls neo-orthodox models of feminist hermeneutics for not attending sufficiently to this point. For an example of the problem, see T. Drorah Setel, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* 86-95.
6. For a clear presentation of the relation between feminist and liberationist hermeneutics, see Fiorenza, "The Function of Scripture in the Liberation Struggle," in *Bread Not Stone,* 43-63.
7. In the language of Jürgen Habermas, ideology produces "systematically distorted communication." For a succinct presentation of Habermas's position, see Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *HHS,* pp. 78-87.
8. The most well known perhaps is the theologian Mary Daly, who is a self-described post-Christian scholar, but an increasing number of feminist scholars in the area of religious studies have abandoned the Christian tradition for various forms of goddess-centered religion. For a more detailed treatment of this phenomenon and a phenomenology of goddess-centered religious involvement, see my *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991), esp. chapter 1.
9. Most typologies of feminist interpretation divide current scholarship into three hermeneutical types: revisionist, liberationist, and reconstructionist. However, as feminist scholars continue to interact, these classifications are breaking down. Whatever hermeneutical position a scholar embraces, certain strategies are shared. On this point, see Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* 55-64. I am concerned here with strategies.
10. On the problem of translation, see Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives on Bible and Theology: An Introduction to Selected Issues and Literature," *Interpretation* 42 (January 1988): 5-18, esp. pp. 16-18.
11. See Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her,* pp. 60-61: "The suggestion of female authorship . . . has great imaginative-theological value because it opens up the possibility of attributing the authority of apostolic writings to women and of claiming theological authority for women" (p. 61).
12. I take this expression from Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" *CBQ* 29 (July 1987), p. 450. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza elaborates the same point in her 1987 Society of Biblical Literature presidential address, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107 (March 1988): 3-17. The recent full-scale rhetorical study by Antoinette C. Wire of the Corinthian correspondence is an example of this type of feminist interpretation: *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

13. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979), pp. 36–40, for a discussion of the entrance of the Samaritans into the Johannine community and their effect on Johannine theology as well as on the relations of Johannine Christians with the Jewish community.

    Literature on the Samaritans, their history, theology, and influence on and in scripture is vast. Of particular importance is the seminal study of Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967). See also Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Origin and Development of Samaritan Christianity," *NTS* 19 (1972–1973): 390–414; John Macdonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964). Samaritan studies are brought up to date and the most important bibliography given by James D. Purvis, "The Samaritans and Judaism," in *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Robert Kraft and George W. E. Nickelsburg (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986).
14. See P. Joseph Cahill, "Narrative Art in John IV," *Religious Studies Bulletin* 2 (April 1982), pp. 44–47.
15. See Calum M. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," *NTS* 26 (1980): 331–346, for detailed treatment of the Old Testament Yahweh-Israel marriage theme in John 4.
16. Mary Margaret Pazdan, "Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman: Contrasting Models of Discipleship," *BTB* 17 (October 1987): 145–148.
17. Raymond F. Collins, "The Representative Figures in the Fourth Gospel," *Downside Review* 94 (January 1976): 26–46 and (April 1976): 118–132.
18. Lyle Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well: Jesus, the Reader and Reader-Response Criticism," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1 (September 1987): 167–183.
19. This thesis was proposed decades ago by John Bligh in "Jesus in Samaria," *The Heythrop Journal* 3 (October 1962): 336. It has been regularly disputed by commentators who prefer the literal interpretation despite the context of the story and the high improbability that any Jew or Samaritan man would marry a woman who had been divorced several times.
20. See Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 198.
21. In this section I am translating *dzēteō* "seek" rather than using the NRSV translation.
22. In John 1, prior to Jesus' emergence into public life at the wedding feast in Cana, John the Baptist points Jesus out to two of his followers, and they bring personal acquaintances and relatives to Jesus. But it is striking that in the fourth gospel Jesus does not call any "apostles," nor does he send his disciples out on missionary journeys.
23. As already pointed out, in the fourth gospel no one is called an apostle. *Disciple* is the term that indicates one's relation to Jesus, who alone is the Sent One. But this woman plainly exercises the apostolic role that Jesus' followers assume only after his departure. Again, this is a clue that this scene does not recount an event of Jesus' earthly life but a postresurrection experience read back into the public life.
24. Cf. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography."

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In this major contribution to the study of the New Testament, Sandra Schneiders, a Catholic biblical scholar and feminist, proposes a new and comprehensive hermeneutical theory for New Testament interpretation, which takes full account of the Bible as both a sacred scripture in the church and as a historical-literary classic in academia.

Schneiders investigates the meaning of the theological claim that the Bible is "Word of God" and the "church's book," along with the implications of these claims for biblical interpretation. She then examines the historical, literary, and religious-spiritual dimensions of the New Testament, highlighting the implications for interpretive theory and methodology. Finally, Schneiders puts her theory to the test in a feminist interpretation of John 4.

The author argues that the comprehensive object of biblical interpretation is not merely information but transformation and that an adequate hermeneutical theory must include a wide range of exegetical and critical methods within a theologically and philosophically adequate understanding of scripture as sacred text.

Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., S.T.D., is professor of New Testament studies and Christian spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

"A major theoretical defense of hermeneutics as transformation in the tradition of Ricoeur and Gadamer, this book should be required reading for all exegetes working within a Christian tradition. The author advocates a holistic model of interpretation which incorporates the broad range of strategies of reading found in the academy today. Her model treats the Bible as the founding text of Christian spirituality and insists that a Christian imagination plays a crucial role in our encounter with and understanding of the text."

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